SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

NO. 365. FOR WEEK ENDING DECEMBER 28TH, 1895. [TWOPENCE.

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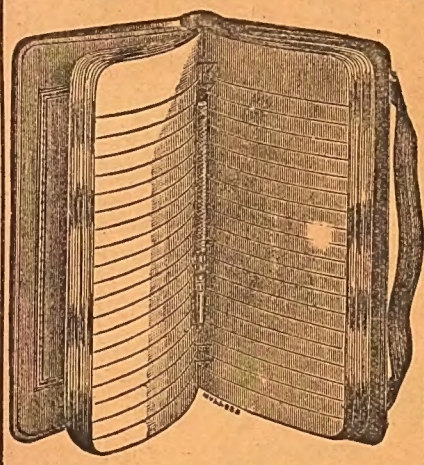

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AMONG the many peculiarities which Captain Clagg, a unique person in this world, possessed there was one more fantastic and ridiculous than all the rest. Captain Clagg, an old sea dog whom neither tempests, death, nor cannon had ever made wink an eye, *was afraid of flies!*

My first feeling, when I noticed this singularity, was to laugh heartily—thinking it a good joke. But when I saw how pained and mortified he was at my ridicule, I determined never to allude to it again. One can explain these absurdities in people of a highly nervous temperament, but Captain Clagg had not a delicate or nervous organisation; I felt sure there was some mystery under this peculiarity. I was not mistaken; and the secret was revealed to me one morning when we were taking breakfast together at a coffee house in Plymouth.

It was a lovely day just before Christmas. We had a fire in the room; but the air was so soft and balmy that we had breakfasted with the windows open. After a little, however, feeling a slight chill, we closed the windows, lighted our cigars, and began to talk of the Captain's last voyage to Africa.

"You don't know the people of Zanguebar," he said. "The men are the bravest soldiers, the women—hark! what is that? Didn't you hear something?" He looked hastily round.

I listened. "No." I could hear nothing.

"Ah! you heard that," he repeated, placing his hand upon my arm. "There it is again! Now you heard it!" gazing with frightened eyes at a distant corner of the room, where a shrill buzzing, a kind of jerky singing, was distinctly heard. "It is there, watching us, waiting to dart upon us. I recognise the buzzing, and if it but touches us we are dead men."

Beginning to be a little alarmed, I said: "What is it? I see nothing."

"For your life, don't move; let me kill it," said the Captain. Seizing a napkin from the table and wrapping it round his hand, he crept towards the spot where he heard the buzzing. There he stopped, and turning to me, said: "Wrap something round your hand, and come here softly."

I did as directed, and going towards him, said: "What is it?"

"Hush! be quiet! don't you see it? there it is, resting—look."

Then I saw the object of all this excitement—*a fly sitting on the wall.*

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My first impulse was to laugh, but Clagg was so pale and excited that the terrible thought came to my mind, "He is mad;" but I merely said: "What! that fly?"

He answered in a low voice: "Hush! be careful; we must crush it. You strike at the same time as I do, and we may be fortunate enough to kill it." We stealthily drew near. Our hands came down upon the wall as in a single blow. The fly soared away unharmed, and alighted on the table.

"Missed it!" muttered Clagg. "We are lost."

"Lost!" I exclaimed. "What, for a fly?"

"Yes," he replied; "that is the Black Fly; one touch of its deadly wings is death—death of the most loathsome kind."

"But we are not obliged to stay here, Captain; let us open the door and go out," I said.

"What! open the door and let it escape to poison all Plymouth, and perhaps breed others? No, you can go if you choose, but I have too much respect for you to believe you capable of such cowardice."

Without saying another word he aimed a fearful blow at the fly resting on the table. It flew away to the window. Then commenced a terrible combat. Captain Clagg was no longer a man, but a savage beast, with flaming eyes and features distorted with rage—leaping, bounding from one end of the room to the other, climbing upon the furniture, upsetting it, breaking it in his pursuit of that flitting creature which appeared to take a wicked pleasure in eluding him; in truth, it seemed as if some infernal spirit possessed that fly and directed its flight.

When Clagg's hand could almost touch it, away it flew to the further end of the room. When he climbed on the table to reach it on the ceiling, presto! it was on the floor. At first I tried to join in the chase, but the leaps and bounds of the Captain were so fast and furious that I was run against and upset two or three times. I finally concluded that it was best to remain in one corner and wait for the fly to come my way.

Gradually Clagg became more tranquil, and seemed disposed to try patience and strategy. He persistently followed the fly, and did not allow it to rest a moment. It was evidently becoming weary. A profound silence reigned in the room, broken only by the continuous buzzing of the insect as it flew from place to place. Suddenly the Captain gave a roar of triumph as his hand struck the table; he rolled it round two or three times with all his might; then, raising it, we saw in the folded napkin the crushed form of the Black Fly.

I know not how much the scene which I had witnessed had excited me; but that miserable insect had something so sinister and venomous in its appearance that it made me shudder. It was very large, hump-backed, knotty, and bristling with hairy protuberances; in truth, it looked like a living poison.

Clagg, with bent head, silently regarded it; a kind of savage melancholy succeeded the tempest of fury which had possessed him; his eyes had a saddened look, as if evoked by tragic memories. He remained thus a few moments without speaking, every now and then passing his hand over his brow, as if something troubled him.

"Ah, my friend," said I, affectionately taking his hand, "can't you tell me what it is?"

In a low voice he replied: "After what you have seen, you can understand how afraid I am of flies. To-day is not the first time you have noticed it; but for shame I would have explained it long ago. You know it is not an easy thing for Captain Clagg to confess that he is

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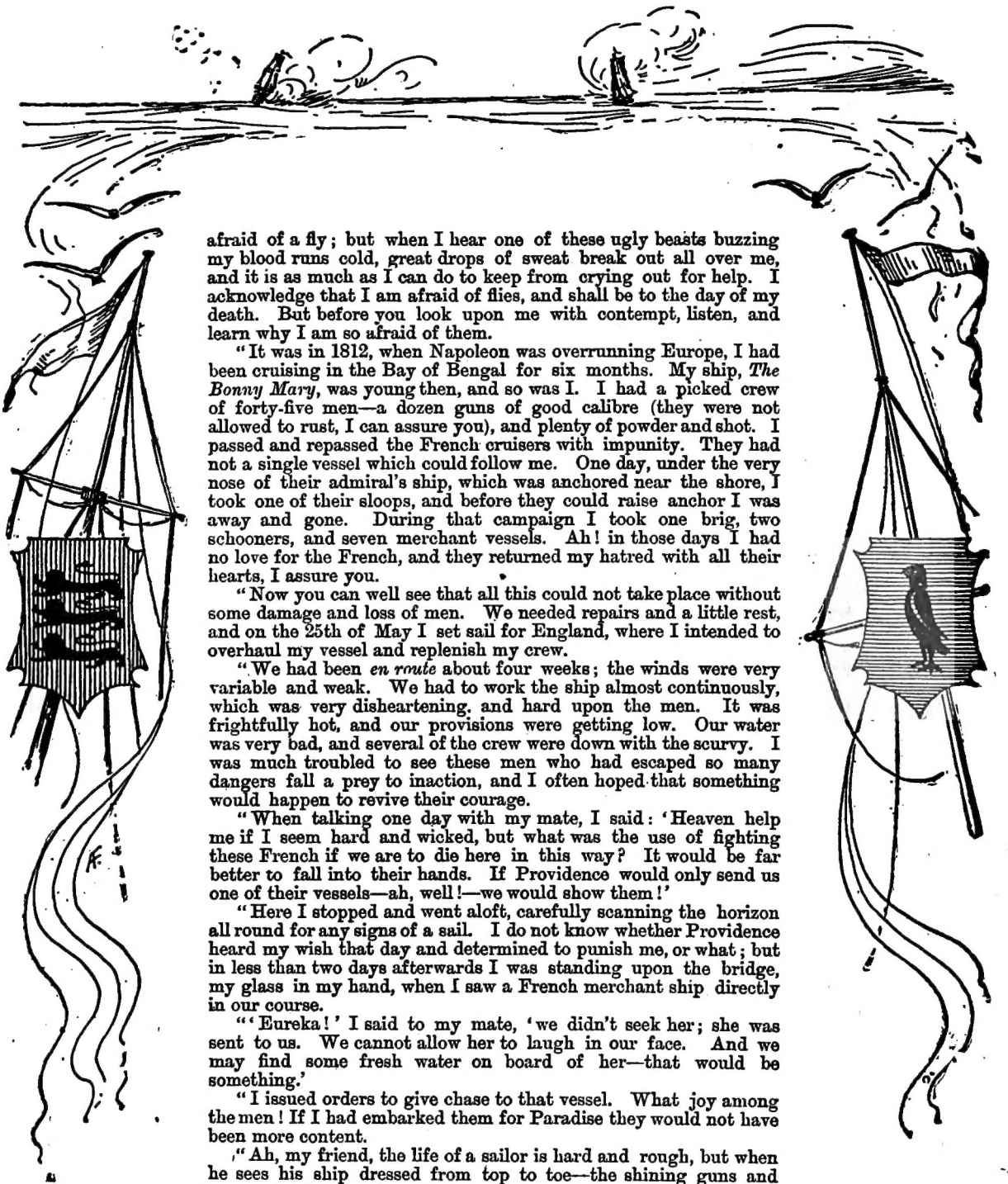

afraid of a fly; but when I hear one of these ugly beasts buzzing my blood runs cold, great drops of sweat break out all over me, and it is as much as I can do to keep from crying out for help. I acknowledge that I am afraid of flies, and shall be to the day of my death. But before you look upon me with contempt, listen, and learn why I am so afraid of them.

"It was in 1812, when Napoleon was overrunning Europe, I had been cruising in the Bay of Bengal for six months. My ship, *The Bonny Mary*, was young then, and so was I. I had a picked crew of forty-five men—a dozen guns of good calibre (they were not allowed to rust, I can assure you), and plenty of powder and shot. I passed and repassed the French cruisers with impunity. They had not a single vessel which could follow me. One day, under the very nose of their admiral's ship, which was anchored near the shore, I took one of their sloops, and before they could raise anchor I was away and gone. During that campaign I took one brig, two schooners, and seven merchant vessels. Ah! in those days I had no love for the French, and they returned my hatred with all their hearts, I assure you.

"Now you can well see that all this could not take place without some damage and loss of men. We needed repairs and a little rest, and on the 25th of May I set sail for England, where I intended to overhaul my vessel and replenish my crew.

"We had been *en route* about four weeks; the winds were very variable and weak. We had to work the ship almost continuously, which was very disheartening. and hard upon the men. It was frightfully hot, and our provisions were getting low. Our water was very bad, and several of the crew were down with the scurvy. I was much troubled to see these men who had escaped so many dangers fall a prey to inaction, and I often hoped that something would happen to revive their courage.

"When talking one day with my mate, I said: 'Heaven help me if I seem hard and wicked, but what was the use of fighting these French if we are to die here in this way? It would be far better to fall into their hands. If Providence would only send us one of their vessels—ah, well!—we would show them!'

"Here I stopped and went aloft, carefully scanning the horizon all round for any signs of a sail. I do not know whether Providence heard my wish that day and determined to punish me, or what; but in less than two days afterwards I was standing upon the bridge, my glass in my hand, when I saw a French merchant ship directly in our course.

"'Eureka!' I said to my mate, 'we didn't seek her; she was sent to us. We cannot allow her to laugh in our face. And we may find some fresh water on board of her—that would be something.'

"I issued orders to give chase to that vessel. What joy among the men! If I had embarked them for Paradise they would not have been more content.

"Ah, my friend, the life of a sailor is hard and rough, but when he sees his ship dressed from top to toe—the shining guns and cannon loaded to the muzzle, only waiting the word of command to vomit forth a rain of grape and canister—grappling-irons and boarding-knives all ready—with forty good men, armed to the teeth, eager for the fray, like tigers scenting blood afar off—ah!"—here the Captain brushed off a tear with his hand—"it brings a thrill, an emotion no other people can know."

He was silent for a moment. He never liked to give the details of his battles; it was a way of showing his modesty. But I lost nothing, thanks to the mobility of his face. His flashing eye and frowning brow, above all

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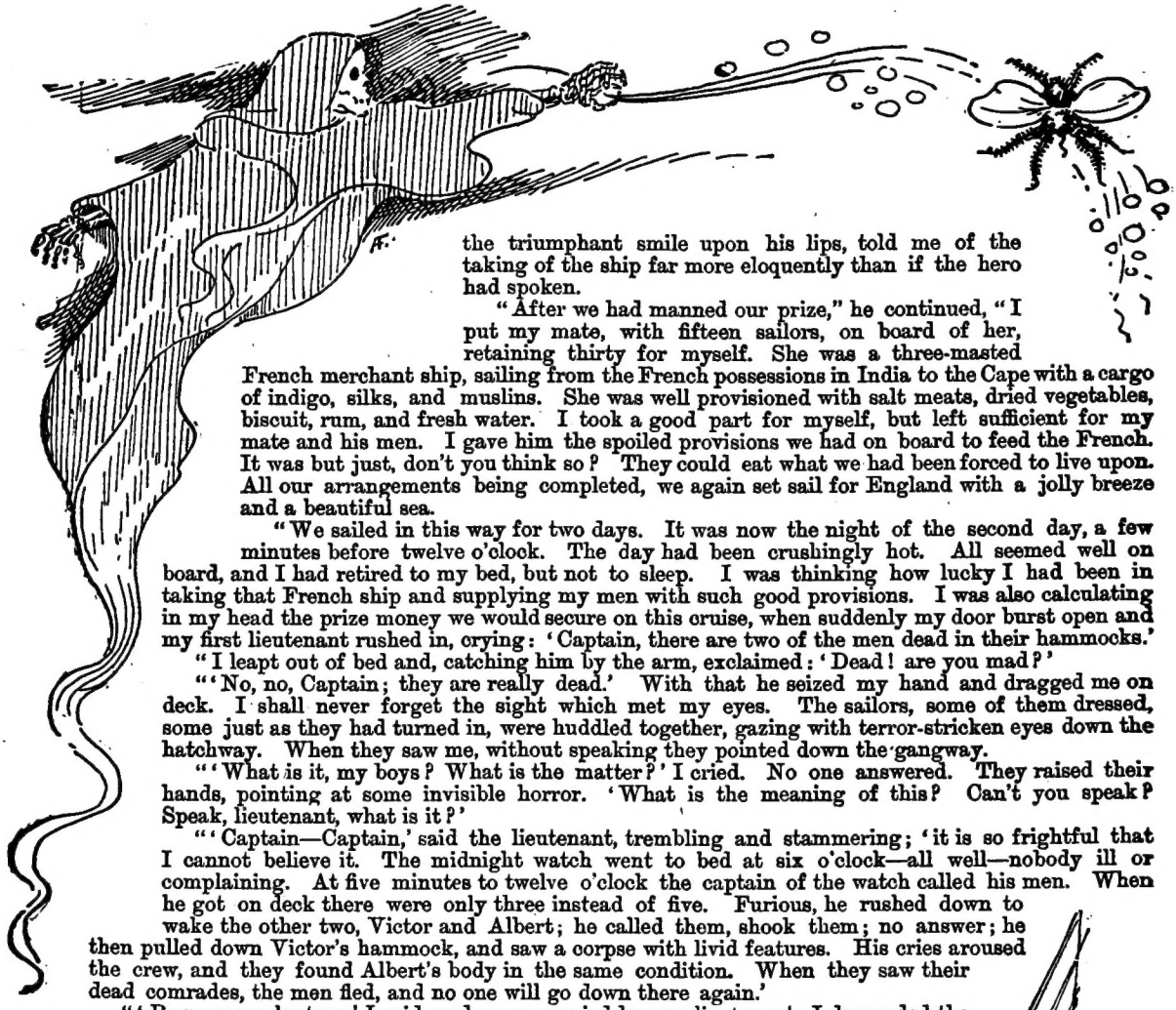


the triumphant smile upon his lips, told me of the taking of the ship far more eloquently than if the hero had spoken.

"After we had manned our prize," he continued, "I put my mate, with fifteen sailors, on board of her, retaining thirty for myself. She was a three-masted French merchant ship, sailing from the French possessions in India to the Cape with a cargo of indigo, silks, and muslins. She was well provisioned with salt meats, dried vegetables, biscuit, rum, and fresh water. I took a good part for myself, but left sufficient for my mate and his men. I gave him the spoiled provisions we had on board to feed the French. It was but just, don't you think so? They could eat what we had been forced to live upon. All our arrangements being completed, we again set sail for England with a jolly breeze and a beautiful sea.

"We sailed in this way for two days. It was now the night of the second day, a few minutes before twelve o'clock. The day had been crushingly hot. All seemed well on board, and I had retired to my bed, but not to sleep. I was thinking how lucky I had been in taking that French ship and supplying my men with such good provisions. I was also calculating in my head the prize money we would secure on this cruise, when suddenly my door burst open and my first lieutenant rushed in, crying: 'Captain, there are two of the men dead in their hammocks.'

"I leapt out of bed and, catching him by the arm, exclaimed: 'Dead! are you mad?'

"'No, no, Captain; they are really dead.' With that he seized my hand and dragged me on deck. I shall never forget the sight which met my eyes. The sailors, some of them dressed, some just as they had turned in, were huddled together, gazing with terror-stricken eyes down the hatchway. When they saw me, without speaking they pointed down the gangway.

"'What is it, my boys? What is the matter?' I cried. No one answered. They raised their hands, pointing at some invisible horror. 'What is the meaning of this? Can't you speak? Speak, lieutenant, what is it?'

"'Captain—Captain,' said the lieutenant, trembling and stammering; 'it is so frightful that I cannot believe it. The midnight watch went to bed at six o'clock—all well—nobody ill or complaining. At five minutes to twelve o'clock the captain of the watch called his men. When he got on deck there were only three instead of five. Furious, he rushed down to wake the other two, Victor and Albert; he called them, shook them; no answer; he then pulled down Victor's hammock, and saw a corpse with livid features. His cries aroused the crew, and they found Albert's body in the same condition. When they saw their dead comrades, the men fled, and no one will go down there again.'

"'Bring me a lantern,' I said, and, accompanied by my lieutenant, I descended the hatchway. I raised the lantern to the face of one of the dead men; the sight was so awful that the lantern slipped from my hand, and, falling to the floor, was extinguished. We were now in total darkness. The lieutenant and I began to feel for the lantern. The idea of being in the dark with these horrible bodies made his teeth chatter, as well as mine. Groping with my hands stretched out, I suddenly heard, just over my head, a kind of buzzing. In a situation like this, my friend, everything takes a sinister aspect. I thought: 'Perhaps it is the soul of one of these poor men who died without confession, asking us for our prayers.' But I only said: 'Is that you, breathing in that way, lieutenant?'

"'No, Captain, I thought it was you. May be it is a cockroach.'

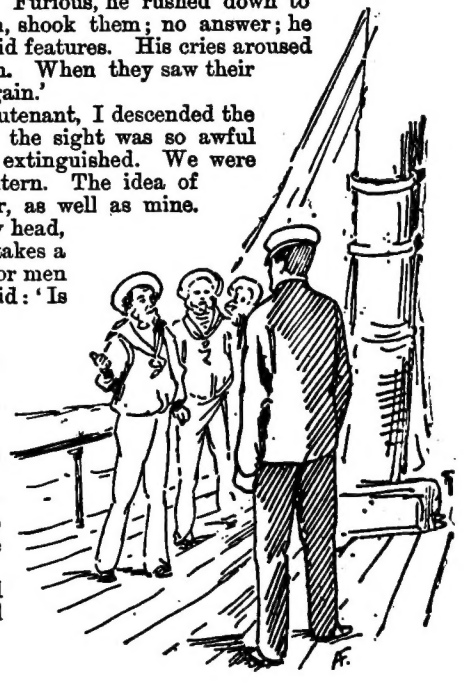
"'No, it is not a cockroach. Who ever heard of a roach buzzing like that?'

"'Oh!' cried the lieutenant, 'something stung me on the lip. How it burns!'

"Just then I put my hand on the lantern, and said: 'Come, let us go up. We must have these poor men carried away.'

"When I got on deck, I immediately questioned the crew—interrogated every sailor, one after the other. It was impossible to learn how these men had died. I said: 'Were none of you awake during the six hours before the watch? Did you hear nothing?'

"They nudged each other and shrugged their shoulders, but said not a word. Finally I saw one of them shaking his head as if he wished to speak. 'Ah! you heard something. What was it?'



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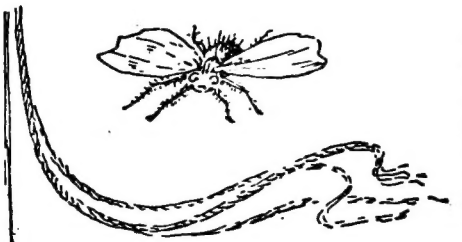


"'Captain, ah! yes. I heard—I am sure I heard something. Maybe it was a dream, but as sure as you see my hand, I heard——'

"Here I caught him by the collar and, giving him a good shaking, said: 'What did you hear?'

"'Well, Captain, it was such a little thing that it is not worth telling. I heard a fly buzzing—a big fly, too; it went like this—buzz-tik.'

"Just then one of the crew said: 'Excuse me, Captain, but the men over there say the French poisoned the provisions we took from them, so as to kill us all.'

"Ah! this was a blow. Could those poor fellows have been poisoned? No; that was impossible. We had been living on the food taken from the French vessel for two days; if that were so, we should all have been dead by this time.

"'Poisoned!' I exclaimed, 'Do you think a sailor, no matter under what flag he sails, could be guilty of such infamy?'

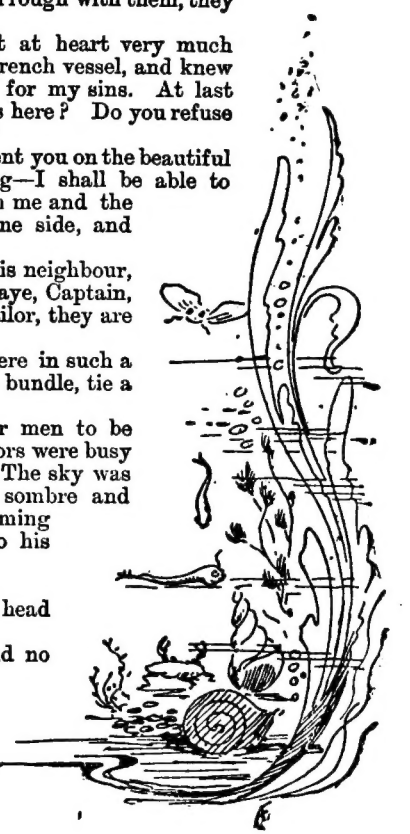
"'No, no; the Captain is right,' they all cried out with one voice.

"'Now, my boys, you know death comes to us all some time or other, and when the time comes we must go; the hour has come for our comrades. Let us say Mass for the repose of their souls, then cast them into the sea. Who will go down and help me bring up the dead bodies?'

"Nobody spoke. They drew back, casting frightened looks down the hatchway. I saw they were wild with fear, and said to myself: 'If I am rough with them, they may lose their heads altogether and mutiny.'

"I stood a few moments coolly regarding them, but at heart very much worried. I regretted the day I had wished to meet a French vessel, and knew Providence had sent that merchant ship as a punishment for my sins. At last an idea came to me. I said: 'Are there no good comrades here? Do you refuse to give these poor men the burial you would give a dog?'

"Scornfully looking at them, I continued: 'I compliment you on the beautiful account I shall give of you in my log-book. Another thing—I shall be able to count the cowards. All of you who dare not go down with me and the lieutenant, to bring up your poor comrades, will stand on one side, and leave the brave sailors on the other.'



"At these words they all turned round, each one pounding and beating his neighbour, and daring him to be a coward; then, with one voice, they cried out: 'Aye, aye, Captain, we will all go with you.' Ah, my friend! if you only know how to take a sailor, they are brave as lions, but tender as little children.

"I thanked them. Then we started down for the dead bodies. They were in such a condition that we had to roll their hammocks, bed clothes, and all, into one bundle, tie a rope round them, and throw them into the sea.

"After this was done, I ordered the hammocks and clothes of the other men to be spread on deck, for fear the disease might prove contagious. While the sailors were busy with this work, I sat on deck, a prey to very sad reflections, I assure you. The sky was covered with heavy clouds; our lanterns only made the darkness more sombre and appalling. The lieutenant was superintending the work, when I saw him coming towards me, staggering and stumbling, and with his handkerchief pressed to his mouth.

"'Well, lieutenant, have you finished?'

"'Not yet, Captain, but I don't know what is the matter with me. My head turns round, my legs give way, and I have an overpowering desire to sleep.'

"He sat down by me, and leaning his head on the back of the seat, said no more.

"We remained thus for some time. The clouds gradually disappeared, the moon came out; I turned to speak to him. I was thunderstruck! His face was black, livid, and terribly swollen, and he seemed asleep. I called him, shook him; he opened his eyes in an unconscious way, and would have fallen to the deck if I had not supported him. I called for help. We carried him to his berth, and did everything we could to save him, but all

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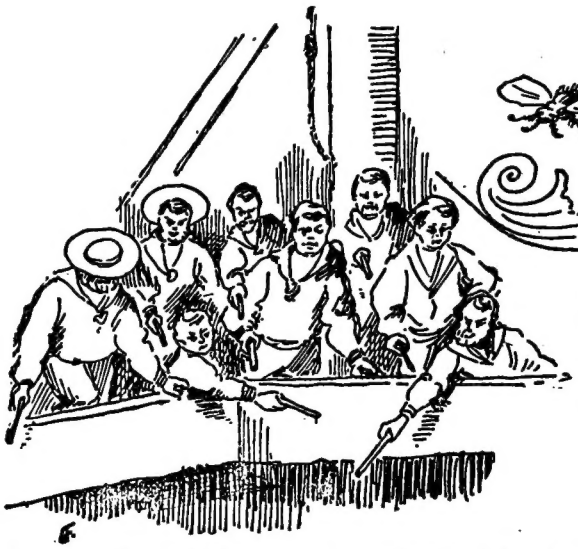

in vain; decomposition set in immediately. He died at four o'clock, just as day was breaking.

"There was no doubt about it. The poor boy—he was only twenty-four years old—had died in the same way as the two sailors. The buzzing we had heard, and the sting of which the lieutenant had complained, were due to some venomous insect. Death was concealed in our midst and flying about; we knew not when or where to expect it. What must I do? If I told the crew, they might become demoralised and forsake the ship. If I did not tell them, how could they guard against this deadly thing which might sting and kill them all? It was all my fault, and the fault of that French vessel—what should I do?

"After mature reflection, I concluded that it was best to tell them. I assembled the crew, and after many preambles, so as not to frighten them, I said: 'There is surely a poisonous fly in our midst which has stung our poor comrades and caused their death. We must find that fly and kill it.'

"I made them take rope brooms, and sweep every hole and corner of the ship. Then I retired to my cabin and wrote in my log-book the dismal events of the night.

"Next morning, after putting the hammocks and clothing in place, the men seemed easier, when I suddenly saw three or four sailors run to one of their comrades. I hurried forward to learn what was the matter.

"On seeing me, the man raised his hand with a despairing gesture, and cried out: 'Captain, I am a dead man; the fly has stung me.'

"I ran to him. There was a red spot on his cheek, and in the centre a tiny speck of blood. I carried him to my room, cut open the jaw, let it bleed freely, bathed it in rum, alcohol, and vinegar—even washed the wound with a brush. Then I left him in the care of two sailors, and returned on deck, determined to find this miserable insect which menaced us all.

"It would be useless to tell you the wild ideas which came into my head; all kinds of death and destruction I concocted for this venomous creature; finally, after turning it over and over in my mind, I arranged my plan and gave the necessary orders for its execution.

"I had the fire-pumps placed on deck at the head of the hatchway. I made my men load their pistols to the muzzle with fine shot (I had a good many sacks of this on board for killing birds); then I said: 'Now, my boys, we must kill this deadly fly. We will first wash out the whole ship; then we will try the shot.'

"We worked the pumps a full hour—a flood of water rushing over the decks. Then I said: 'If it is not drowned and is still flying about, we will get him this time.' So I ordered my men to aim their pistols in every direction down the hatchway, and gave the word to fire.

"Thirty pistols went off at the same time. 'If it escaped *that*,' I said, 'he is hard to kill; but I am sure it is dead, either drowned, or shot into a thousand pieces, and the first one who speaks of that fly'—here I significantly tapped the barrel of my pistol. Just then one of the sailors left in charge of the sick man came up to say that his comrade seemed better. To my great surprise he continued to improve, passed a good night, and next day was nearly well.

"It is needless to say that from that time no one dared speak a word of the fly, but it was plainly to be seen that my sailors were no longer the same men; they had an anxious, harassed look, continually watching and looking from right to left, every now and then suddenly stopping to listen. They no longer laughed or told jokes: they were quiet and watchful, like men expecting some concealed danger of which they dared not speak. I saw all were possessed with one idea—the fear of that fly.

"Ah, my friend! you cannot imagine how cruel it was for a Captain to see his men, who in a six months' cruise had taken a brig, two schooners, and seven merchant ships, lose all their courage, all energy, and become as cowardly and timid as little children before a fly—no, not even a fly, but the ghost of a fly. It was fifteen days before we could reach England, and in time of war no one could tell what might happen with a demoralised crew.

"So I must do something, and I thought if I could only show them this fly—let them see it, dead or alive—they would be cured of their folly. But where was I to find a fly? On land, easy enough; but in a ship far out at sea it seemed impossible. Still, this did not prevent me from saying: 'I will find that fly.' Now, who can find if he does not seek?

"I took five men under the pretence of cleaning the ship, and from morning till night, from the helm to the bowsprit, from the keel to the top of the highest mast, there was not a spot or crevice which we did not visit and search. We had worked in this way for nearly a week, when one afternoon I went with these sailors into the

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forecastle where the men slept. In one corner there was a heap of old worn-out shirts. I pushed them aside with my foot, and said to a sailor just behind me: 'What is that? I see something black lying on the floor. Is it the end of a cigar? It is not possible that any one has dared smoke here?' The sailor picked up the object and handed it to me. As soon as I saw it, I made the sign of the cross and cried out: 'Thank Heaven we are safe at last! Don't you see that it is that deadly beast—the fly?'

"I rushed on deck, assembled the crew, and, showing it to them, said: 'See how stupid you were, always twisting and craning your heads watching for that fly! You can't conceal anything from me. I saw you, and if I had not by a miracle found the venomous thing, I verily believe you would have gone mad. Now I hope you are satisfied *that it is really dead.*'

"It was droll to see how their faces brightened; they actually became gay, as they took the fly and leisurely examined it. One old tar, on returning it to me, said: 'Ah, Captain! I am so glad you found it, for, in spite of all we could do, we could not keep from thinking of that fly. We always heard it buzzing about our ears, and I declare to you if I did not see that it was dead, and had been dead a long time, I could swear I heard it buzzing at the door of your cabin last night; but now I see it was only a fancy.'"

You can imagine with what interest I followed the Captain's story. But at this incident, so suggestive of the energy and shrewdness of this unique individual, I could not keep from clasping his hand and exclaiming: "And so you found the fly, Captain! Well, that surpasses all!"

He looked at me in a quizzical way, a peculiar smile parting his lips. "Found the fly!" he said. "Do you think so? Well, you shall see.

"I was determined to find it in some way, but terribly puzzled what to do, and would have given a thousand pounds for a fly. I commenced searching for one in every direction; but you can't comb the devil if he has no hair; there were no flies to be found, so I determined to make one. Do you know what I did? I caught a cockroach, cut down his wings and body to the size of a big fly; soaked him in ink, then dried him, and threw him down before that sailor when he was not looking."

"Nonsense, Captain! You don't expect me to believe that your sailors swallowed this, and thought it was the Black Fly?"

"Ah, my friend! you don't know what children sailors are."

Here he gave a long breath, a sigh of remorse, and, raising his eyes to Heaven said: "That fly made me commit a deadly sin, but I was punished. Do you see that?" uncovering his wrist and showing me a deep, round scar. "I did that myself. If I had not I should not be here to-day to tell this story. Perhaps you think, after what I have told you, that all was ended, and we heard no more of the Black Fly. Ah, you shall see. While I was modelling her likeness in the body of my cockroach she was laughing at me and tranquilly promenading my ship from one end to the other. The buzzing which the sailors had heard was not imaginary, and their fancies were only too true.

"About a week after this adventure of the cockroach, I was sitting in my cabin examining my chart, when I heard something buzzing behind my back. I turned round to look. Suddenly I felt something like a needle pierce my left wrist. I gave a quick slap with my right hand, and crushed a great fly like the one you see there. Merciful powers! What should I do? I looked at the spot; it was already red and beginning to swell—a tiny drop of blood in the centre. There was a large sharp knife lying on my table. I seized it, quick as a flash, and with my right hand cut out a great lump of flesh all round the sting. I allowed it to bleed freely, then bathed it in alcohol and ammonia, and bandaged it. Not a word did I breathe to my crew of how I had hurt my hand.

"This fly came from the provisions which I had taken from the French vessel, and never shall I get it out of my head but that it was sent as a punishment for my sin in wishing to encounter one of their ships when there was no necessity for it. You see, when I commit a sin, I do not try to find some one to lay it on."

"But, Captain, what about that cockroach?" I said.

"For that lie I was punished, and shall bear the mark to my dying day."

The Captain continued: "When we reached Plymouth, I told an eminent physician my story. He said it was the Black Fly of the Ganges, very common in the environs of Calcutta. The natives call them 'Breeders of Pestilence.'

"Now, my friend, you know why I am afraid of flies."

E. Garnet.

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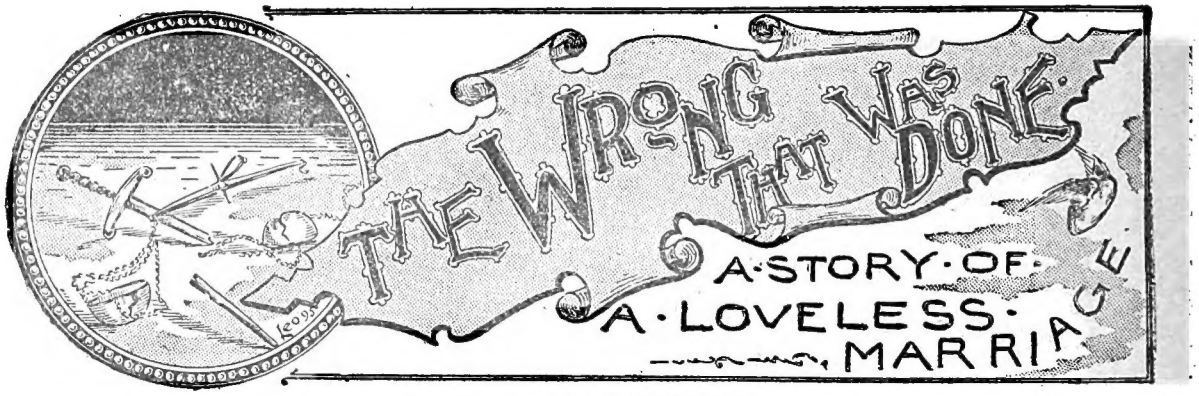

By E. C. WAGGENER.

CHAPTER I.

The plum trees were white with fragrant blossoms, the oaks hung out long tassels of palest emerald, and the maples were red with young leaves that only waited for warmer showers and brighter sunshine to change them to vivid green. Already the fields were beginning to look bright, and along the sunny slopes, and in the moist, sheltered valleys, the soft-springing verdure was starred with buttercups and daisies.

A gentle south wind, blowing across the hills and just stirring the budding leaves and opening flowers, brought with it that sense of freshness and vague delight which belongs only to the early springtime.

The young girl who came swiftly down the straggling little lane, that led from an old, grey, weather-beaten house on the hill to the railway-station below, must have felt something of the dewy sweetness and beauty of the morning, apart from some pleasing expectancy, for her hat was pushed back from her flushed face, allowing the cool breeze to wander through her hair, and her eyes shone with a bright, happy light.

Lovely eyes they were, too. Grey as to colour, and with a tender, wistful expression that lent a strange charm to her otherwise plain face. The coarse dark hair, growing low on the forehead, held no claim to beauty, except a tendency to cling in little curls about the temples, and the straight black eyebrows were too heavy to be pretty, even though they shaded such wonderful eyes. The mouth was large yet expressive, and there was a faint, habitual droop at the corners which caused the whole face to wear an odd, pathetic look, as if both laughter and tears were akin to it.

There was certainly no grace in the thin, angular form, with its stooping shoulders and narrow chest, yet one forgot to criticise the shyness and awkwardness of every movement in wondering what there was about the face to make it so strangely attractive.

She paused at a little gate that barred her way, and, shading her face with her hand, looked long and eagerly down the railway lines. Suddenly the faint, far-off whistle of a coming train was heard, and, hastily unfastening the gate, she hurried down the path towards the station.

When the gate swung to with a sharp click, a middle-aged man who was sitting in a large window watching with a grim smile the girl's movements, stood up from his seat and called in a thin, rasping voice:

"Helen! Helen!"

The girl stopped suddenly in her rapid walk, and, wheeling round, turned an impatient face towards the house.

"Well, what is it?" she asked curtly.

"I just want to say that I don't believe Kitty will come, so there's no need of breaking your neck to get to the station. You've been looking for her in vain for a week now, and as she didn't come on Monday it isn't very likely that she'll come at all. And if she *should* put in an appearance she can easily find her way to the house ——"

But the girl waited to hear no more. With a low, half-angry exclamation she turned away, and, quickening her steps, reached the station just as the train rounded the bend in the line. The station-master, a wizen-faced old man, came hurrying out of the dingy little office with the mail-bag in one hand and a formidable-looking bundle in the other.

"Lookin' fur somebody, air you?" he remarked, with a sharp glance at Helen's flushed, eager face.

"I'm expecting Kitty," she said. "She ought to have been here a week ago."

"So Miss Kitty's comin' back. Well, well, well! I should think she wouldn't fancy comin' after what happened five years ago," mumbled the old man, as he edged nearer the platform.

Either his voice was lost in the roar of the coming train, or else Helen was indifferent to his words, for she made no answer, but sat with her eyes fixed intently on a face that was pressed against one of the windows of a third-class carriage, but which disappeared as the engine came to a sudden standstill.

In a moment the door was flung open, and a slight, girlish figure sprang lightly out on the platform straight into Helen's arms.

"I was sure you would be here to meet me," said the new comer in a voice of singular sweetness.

"And I was afraid I would be disappointed, as I have been every day for a week," said Helen. "Oh, Kitty, I'm so glad, so glad!" and she took her sister's face between her two hands and covered it with kisses. "It seems too good to be true to have you with me after all these years," she added, gazing down with moist eyes, yet smiling the while for pure joy.

"Have you really missed me so much?" asked Kitty presently, as they climbed the steep hillside.

"Have I missed you? Why, there hasn't been a day that I haven't missed you and longed to see you," said Helen, giving the hand within her own a loving squeeze.

"And our stepfather—was *he* expecting me?" asked Kitty suddenly, and with a little gesture towards the house.

"I—I—think not," returned Helen, somewhat confusedly. "He remarked this morning that he didn't believe you'd come—that you were afraid ——"

"Indeed!" interrupted Kitty, with a contemptuous smile. "Does he think I fear *him*? What was there to prevent me from coming? This is my home as well as yours, although I come back to it as a stranger."

"That is what I told him," put in Helen eagerly. "I mean I told him you had a perfect right to come. And now that you are here don't let anything he may do or say drive you away again."

"Nothing can drive me away if I choose to stay," said

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Kitty, with a proud uplifting of her small head. "Sometimes," and she set her white teeth firmly together for a second, "I wonder how you have endured him all these years; how you have borne with his crafty, wheedling ways, his lying tongue, and his detestable hypocrisy. I think it would be the happiest moment in my life if I could see him lying dead before me."

"Oh, Kitty, it's wicked to talk like that," cried Helen reproachfully. "I don't wish *that* of him, though I would be glad if he'd go away and leave us in peace."

"He will never do it," said Kitty passionately. "Just as long as he lives he'll stay here and make life wretched for us both. I would do right to take you away from him; but should you leave here you would be giving up the last hope of ever asserting your right to the place, and for your sake I'll stay with you and defy him to the bitter end. Don't think because I've stayed away all these years that I care nothing for the old home. Every tree and flower, every nook and corner of it is dear to me, yet it has never been the same to me since he came here and darkened our lives."

"Still there has been no change in it," said Helen thoughtfully.

"No, it is we who are changed," sighed Kitty, as they walked slowly up the familiar path.

Two cedars, straight and tall, stood like sentinels at the entrance of the gate; a honeysuckle that was beginning to take on fresh green leaves drooped over the wide porch, a lilac tree covered with great spikes of purple blossoms shaded the front windows, and the gravelled pathway leading up to the house was white with the fallen blooms of the cherry trees that grew in even rows on either side. Great oaks that had stood for half a century spread their budding branches over the mossy roof, and a quaint, old-fashioned garden stretched its cool vistas down to the edge of a shadowy pine forest.

"You are not going to quarrel with him, are you, Kitty?" asked Helen, with a quick glance at the bent figure in the porch.

"It rests with him," answered Kitty briefly.

"So you have come," and the figure slowly rose and extended a long, bony hand. "To say that I am surprised would be putting it rather mildly. You are none the less welcome, though, after your long absence," and a disagreeable smile distorted the man's face.

"Thanks," returned Kitty, in an icy tone, affecting not to see the offered hand. And without another word she followed Helen into the house.

"Now tell me, dear," she said, when she had laid aside her hat, and bestowed a passing glance at herself in the old-fashioned mirror that hung over the fireplace, "does the worthy Colonel really mean to be friendly with me. Or was his pleasant greeting only a mask to hide his hypocrisy? Five years ago we parted bitter enemies. To-day he meets me with a show of friendship that I don't in the least understand or like."

"Don't ask me what he means, Kitty, for in all these years I have never been able to understand him," said Helen with a troubled look. "I know he has seemed glad and relieved that we never heard from you. And often when I have begged him to try to learn your whereabouts he has ventured the opinion that you were either dead or wished to be considered dead, not only to your friends here in Looe but to me. But now that you are here, and he has met you in a friendly way, you'll be civil to him, won't you, Kitty? For my sake, if not for your own, don't quarrel with him again."

"I will refrain from a great many things for your sake," said Kitty, with an impulsive hug. "I will—" Then she stopped suddenly, and a queer expression crossed her face. "Why do you look at me so strangely, Helen?" she asked slowly.

"I was just thinking how much you have changed," said Helen with a little sigh.

"Have I grown old and ugly in five years?"

"No, you are the same beautiful Kitty you were when you went away. And yet there is something about your face that I don't quite understand."

"Perhaps it has grown hard," said Kitty with a light laugh. "When one has lost faith in everybody—"

"Surely you haven't lost faith in everybody?" and Helen lifted a pair of anxious, questioning eyes to her sister's face.

"In everybody but you, I think. But you, too, are changed. I left you a little girl, and come back to find you a serious-faced woman, burdened, no doubt with many household cares. Yet you are much prettier than you were when I kissed you good-bye five years ago."

Helen flushed hotly at the unexpected compliment, and fled to the window to hide her confusion.

"How I long to get into the woods again!" began Kitty, when she was interrupted by the sudden opening of the door.

"The Colonel wants to see the young lady in the parlour," said a drawling voice. "The young lady that's jest come, I mean," and the head that had appeared so unceremoniously vanished as suddenly as it came.

"A new servant, I presume, and, like her master, has yet to learn good manners," remarked Kitty drily. "How often does Colonel Beverly make a change in his servants, Helen?"

"Once a month," said Helen laughing. "He finds fault with them continually, and ends by dismissing them before the month is up and engaging new ones, who meet with the same fate."

"And I suppose the poorer he gets the greater number of servants he keeps," said Kitty with a little scornful curl of her lip. "When I think of the money he has squandered," she went on excitedly, "money that was rightfully yours and mine, I feel that I was very foolish not to consult a lawyer in the very beginning."

"But I wonder what he can have to say to me that he must needs see me alone?" said Kitty resentfully.

"I'm sure I haven't the least idea. But you must go to him, Kitty, or we'll see no peace for the rest of the day. And no matter how cross and disagreeable he is, don't quarrel with him, please."

"It all depends upon what he has to say to me. If he means to tell me that my presence in this house interferes with his comfort in any way I shall tell him plainly that I shall stay just as long as I choose, and that I have come back to protect you and stay with you until you grow tired of me and send me away. Don't be a little goose!" For Helen was clinging to her, tears in her soft eyes and a flush of excitement on her face. "I shan't make a scene if I can avoid it. And, whatever happens, I'll try to treat him civilly for your sake."

Stood up from his seat.

CHAPTER II.

"I REALLY must thank you for your promptness in granting me this interview," said Colonel Beverly, as with a pompous wave of his hand, he motioned Kitty to a chair

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directly opposite his own. "I hardly expected you'd be willing to hold a conversation with me after—ahem!" and he coughed nervously behind his hand—"the—the—absence of any cordiality in your greeting a little while ago. The past——"

"I didn't come here to discuss the past," interrupted Kitty stiffly. "If you have anything important to say to me, Colonel Beverly——"

"Why not call me father?" put in the Colonel, with an insinuating smile and a crafty look in his deep-set eyes. "Helen never thinks of calling me anything else."

"Helen may call you anything she pleases. You have never been, nor will ever be, anything but Colonel Beverly to *me*."

"Very well; we won't quarrel about such a trifling matter. But, in coming back here after an absence of five years, during which we had no knowledge of your whereabouts, I should think you'd be willing to forget a great deal, so long as *I* show a disposition to be friendly and lenient."

"Spare me the infliction of another long sentence like that, and come to the point at once, if you please," said Kitty impatiently. "What do you want? And what have you to say to me that you summon me here before I have been in the house half an hour?"

She spoke in a quiet, even voice, controlling her temper, which had risen hot and fierce at his cool impertinence, and giving no sign of the disgust and repugnance which she felt for him.

"It is very important that I should see you and speak to you in private, and at once, else I would have deferred this interview until some more favourable time," he said, dropping his insolent tone and assuming an air of injured innocence. "Of course, you find your sister much changed," he went on, leaning back comfortably in his chair and looking straight at the beautiful face before him. "When you went away she was a mere child. She is a woman now, and while she is neither very pretty nor very accomplished, she isn't at all bad-looking, and, I suppose, would receive a great deal of attention if there weren't so few marriageable men in Looe. As it is she has led a very secluded life——"

He neglected her shamefully.

"Is it really necessary to enter into this long explanation before stating your object in sending for me?" interrupted Kitty.

"Patience, patience, my dear girl. I am coming to that presently," he said, with a smile that was meant to be bland. "I suppose"—and he rubbed his hands together and chuckled softly—"you have never thought of the probability of your sister marrying some day, eh?"

"It hasn't entered my mind, though there would be nothing strange or unnatural in her getting married, provided she found some one worthy of her and whom she loved. I suppose if she has any intention of getting married she'll tell me in due time."

"Doubtless she will."

"When I said there were very few marriageable men in Looe I didn't mean that Helen had never had an offer. She has met and is engaged to a man in every way worthy of her, and I give you fair warning that you are not to come between them. You have come home to remain, I presume, for an indefinite time, and, of course, will see and be thrown a great deal with the man your sister is to marry; so I wish you to distinctly understand that I won't have any interference on your part, nor shall you carry on any flirtation under her innocent eyes. She was too young to understand the whole of that wretched affair with Val; but *I* know you, and I repeat it, you shall do nothing to prevent this marriage. You ruined one man's life and drove him to the bad, and I want none of your old tricks here again."

"Indeed!" said Kitty in a low voice. She had risen to her feet and stood with one hand resting lightly on the mantel. Only the sudden trembling of her fingers, and the ashy pallor that had spread over her face, betrayed her terrible anger. "There never has been, there never can be, the slightest feeling of friendship between you and me," she went on; "but understand this much, I shall remain in this house, where I have a perfect right to be, just as long as I choose to stay.

"And you are never to mention Valentine Beverly's name to me again. You have some hidden purpose in wanting to be the first to inform me of Helen's engagement. I love her too well to oppose her in anything that concerns her happiness, and shall certainly say nothing to prevent her from marrying whom she chooses. But I shall not keep silent through fear of *you*. If the man is worthy of her, why are you afraid that I will interfere? Did she make her own selection, or did you make it for her? Remember, when she marries she will not be compelled to remain under the same roof with you."

"I have had that fact in my mind for several years."

"Why our mother should have exacted such a promise from her I could never understand."

The Colonel leant forward in his chair, and rested his sharp chin in his long, claw-like hands.

"I know this much," continued Kitty quickly, "that you spoilt her life and broke her heart with your cruel neglect. You married her for her money, and when you had squandered all you could get possession of, you neglected her shamefully, often refusing to provide even the necessaries of life. Do you think I have forgotten those dreadful days when Helen and I went about clothed like beggars? Do you think I have forgotten how mother looked? How she trembled at the sound of your voice, and even hid, at times, to escape your outbursts of temper? Do you think I don't remember the many times you came home intoxicated, bringing into this very room a crowd of villainous men who drank and smoked and made the night hideous with their quarrels and noisy mirth?"

"Take care, take care! you are going a little too far," said the Colonel, choking down his wrath and trying to force a smile to his lips. "As I said before, I have no wish to quarrel with you. Now that you are here, it suits my present purpose to be on friendly terms with you. To be frank with you, Helen's marriage will leave me in quiet possession of the place, unless you choose to make trouble."

"But it is *my* home, too; so if Helen marries I must go out into the world again and earn my living. Is that what you mean?"

"Can't you make your home with her, and leave me in peace?"

"I came back here to assert my rights—mine and Helen's," said Kitty firmly, "and shall make no such promise as you wish me to make. I did a very foolish thing when I went away. I shall stay here with Helen until she marries. And then—"

"Well?"

"Then *you* will have to go away."

The Colonel stroked his beard softly and laughed.

"Would you mind telling me where you spent the last five years?" he asked presently. "You see, it will be rather awkward not to explain to your friends where you

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have been and what you have been doing all this time."

"I have no friends here in Looe to whom I think it necessary to explain anything," answered Kitty haughtily.

"Then you intend to leave that disagreeable task to me?"

"To *you?*"

"Yes, I repeat it, to *me*. Do you think I haven't kept track of you ever since you left us? Do you think I don't know where you have been all these years?"

"And does Helen know?"

"Sit down and don't look so frightened. I'm not such a bitter enemy as you think. Not a soul here in Looe save myself knows the truth, and I am quite willing to keep your secret, provided you don't interfere with any of my plans. Defy me, though, and try to thrust me out of the only home I have, and you'll see what will come of it. And now I think we understand each other perfectly."

"Everything has changed since he commenced coming here."

Kitty rose and moved slowly towards the door, her face pale as death, a strange look of misery in her eyes.

CHAPTER III.

"I believe I'll run down to Mallingford to-day," remarked Colonel Beverly to his step-daughters, as they sat at breakfast one morning a week later. "Do you think you can manage to get along without me for one night?"

"Yes, if it is necessary for you to leave us; but it will be terribly lonely without you," said Kitty, so sweetly that Helen, a little doubtful of the quiet irony of the speech, gave her a quick, puzzled look, but said nothing.

A heavy rain had been falling since early dawn, and showed no signs of abating, when the three rose from the table, the girls to go to their room, the Colonel to put on his waterproof overcoat preparatory to picking his way along the muddy road to the station.

"I wonder," inquired Kitty, turning round and looking steadily at Helen, "if you have been keeping a secret from me ever since I came home."

"A secret? I—I—really don't know what you mean."

"You must be very simple and stupid then. I mean, do you like Gifford Vane very much?" said Kitty presently. "Is he more than a friend to you? Surely as your sister I have a right to know."

"Yes, Kitty, I *do* care for him—very much. I meant to tell you all about it the very first day you came home, but you gave me no encouragement. You said you had lost faith in everybody, and I was afraid you'd laugh at me if I told you how much faith I have in Gifford. Father liked him from the first, and has always seemed proud of his attentions to me. There is no regular engagement, though. But we understand each other perfectly, and I think he is only waiting to get a good practice (you know he is a doctor) before he asks me to marry him.

"He often says that no man has a right to ask a woman to marry him until he is able to provide everything necessary to her comfort and happiness. I think he's sensible, don't you? And, oh, Kitty, you can't guess how everything has changed since he commenced coming here! Father is kinder to me than he ever was in his life—I mean when he isn't drinking—and, well, I have very little to complain of now. And to think how lonely my life used to be!"

"And mine," commenced Kitty, then stopped abruptly, and walked hastily away from the mirror to the window.

"Tell me about it," said Helen, following her up. "Why have you kept yourself hidden from us all these years? I know you quarrelled with father and went away to teach in a school; but I never understood why you refused to come back."

"I had my choice—either to stay here and endure our stepfather's disagreeable temper, or go out into the world and earn my living. I chose the latter, because life in the same house with that man had grown unbearable. But I found the other life almost as hard, and there was only a little while during the past five years that I was happy. So you see mine, too, was a hard, bitter lot."

"You should have married," said Helen impulsively.

"Unfortunately there was no brave knight to step in and rescue me from my hard fate, as they do in the fairy books and sometimes in real life," said Kitty, with a short, bitter laugh. "Tell me," she added, looking earnestly into her sister's wistful eyes, "if you should find out that Gifford loved someone else would you care very much?"

"Would I care? Why, Kitty, I wouldn't want to live another minute!"

"Many a woman has said the same and thought the same, yet lived to laugh at her folly."

"It's no folly with *me*," said Helen passionately. "I *know* I would die if I were to find out that Gifford is only trifling with me. But he isn't. He wouldn't be coming here every day and showing me the attention he does without meaning to ask me to marry him. Do you think he would?"

"Don't take my foolish words to heart, for I really didn't mean them,"

Rummaging in an old-fashioned writing-desk.

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said Kitty hastily. "I'm always making some thoughtless speech that I regret the next moment. I am sure Doctor Vane couldn't find a sweeter, better wife than my little sister—not if he hunted the world over."

"He hasn't seen *you*," said Helen, with a troubled look. "Not that I am jealous of you—don't think that, Kitty," she added quickly. "But you are so different from me. You have seen something of the world, and you know how to say those little things that please and flatter a man, while I am plain and awkward, and haven't education enough to make myself attractive to anybody. I hardly know how to express it, but I realise more and more every day that you and I are as different as it is possible for two persons to be."

"With this in your favour," said Kitty hastily, "that you haven't lost your childish faith and simplicity, and I have grown old before my time."

"Nonsense! At your age you are just beginning to live," said Helen, recovering her spirits and laughing gaily. "Just wait until you see John Eastman. I feel sure that you'll fall in love with each other at first sight."

"So you are going to turn matchmaker in your young and innocent days," said Kitty, with a yawn. "What a dismal morning," she added, going over to the window and looking out. "And how dark and lonesome the woods seem through this mist of rain."

Was it because of the dripping trees outside, the blurred landscape, and the dismal sighing of the wind that she felt so dispirited and desolate? Or was it because of bitter memories that she stood there with hot tears in her eyes and a fierce pain in her heart?

"It is always cold and dreary and lonesome in those woods," remarked Helen presently. "I have walked through them often on a sultry summer day and felt chilled to the very marrow before I came out."

Then a long silence fell between them, broken only by the wailing of the wind outside and the steady patter of the rain on the roof.

"I must show you the miniature I have of Gifford," said Helen suddenly. "I don't know why I haven't thought of it before." And rummaging in an old-fashioned writing-desk she took from one of the drawers a small velvet case, which she opened and handed to her sister.

"It's a good likeness, Kitty, though it was taken five years ago. One could never forget that face after seeing it once," she added proudly.

And, indeed, there was something strangely attractive about it. Not so much because of its perfect features as for the haunting look in the clear, smiling eyes. And as Kitty looked at those eyes and then at the fair, open brow that imparted such a boyish expression to the whole countenance, she would have given the half of her life to have been able to forget it.

How well she remembered the day when Gifford Vane had placed this same velvet case in her hand, with the laughing remark that it would serve to remind her of him should they ever be parted. How vividly every incident connected with that day came back to wring and torture her heart! The foolish quarrel, when she had given him back the miniature; the reconciliation that followed, her request for the picture, and his promise that she should have it back again that very evening. Then his unexpected summons to a distant town, his hasty departure, his forgetting to return the miniature—and then the long dreary silence that came afterwards. And now, after all these years, to find the gift she had prized above all others in the possession of another, and that other her sister. How would it all end, she wondered.

She closed the case and handed it to Helen with a smile.

"What do you think of him, Kitty?"

"He is very handsome, and I don't wonder that you love him," said Kitty, in a low, unsteady voice. Then she turned abruptly to the window again. Oh, to have this sick-longing for the touch of his hand and the sound of his voice, and to know that she had lost him for ever. And to add to her misery was the consciousness that he had long ago dismissed her from his mind and heart.

No wonder Helen had stared at her, a moment ago, in vague surprise; for, in spite of her effort at self-control, she felt that she had betrayed herself, and that her face, which had the unhappy trick of showing traces of tears for hours afterwards, would still further betray her if she stirred from her hiding-place there by the window.

(To be continued.)

A TEN-POUND PRIZE.

On the opposite page is a puzzle picture composed of 99 squares. If these squares be rearranged in a certain order they will form a real picture.

We offer a prize of £10 to the first person who sends the correct solution. In order to give readers in all parts of the United Kingdom as equal a chance as possible, the whole of the solutions received at 17, Henrietta Street in any one day will be considered together. In the very unlikely chance of two or more correct solutions being included in one day's post, the prize will be given to the sender of the *neatest* one.

If no correct solution be received on or before Tuesday, January 7th, 1896, the Ten-Pound Prize will be given to the sender of the solution then to hand which is most nearly correct.

Pictures should be packed flat or folded, not rolled, and the outside wrapper must be marked "December."

N.B.—To make the puzzle more difficult some of the squares have been turned upside down.

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rushed in crying: "The king! Here comes the king!"

Lilith had only time to hide Hozaël in a large basket, and cover him with a pile of silks and bright wools, before King Herod entered with a slow, heavy tread, the chains and plates of gold, with which he was covered, shaking with each movement. His back was bent, and his blood-shot eyes glared in his terrible face; his chin shook so with the palsy that his bristly beard seemed to shudder. He said to Lilith: "Whence comest thou?"

She replied: "From Jericho." And she raised towards the king her eyes, as calm as the water of a cistern.

"Oh! how she resembles her!" murmured Herod.

At this moment, a little cry came from the basket.

"Will you keep quiet?" said Lilith to the cat, Astaroth, who slept on the rug. Then she said to the king: "My father, you seem troubled: would you like me to sing to you?"

And taking her zither, she sang him a song about roses.

And the king murmured: "Oh, that voice!"

Then he fled, as if struck with fear, because Lilith's voice and eyes recalled to him the voice and eyes of Queen Miriam.

* * * * *

Lilith went into the garden and found old Zabulon weeping.

"Why dost thou weep, old Zabulon?"

"You know the cause, Princess Lilith. I weep because the king wishes to kill the little child who is the Messiah."

"But," said Lilith, "if he is really the Messiah, men cannot have the power to kill him."

"God wishes us to help him," replied Zabulon. "Princess, you, who are so good and so compassionate, should warn the father and mother of the child."

"But where shall I find them?"

"Question the people of Bethlehem."

"But ought I to save one who will chase my father from this palace, one by whom I may some day become a poor prisoner, or a beggar in the streets?"

"That day is far removed," said Zabulon, "and the Messiah is now only a tiny babe, more helpless even than little Hozaël."

"But art thou sure that he is the Messiah?" demanded Lilith.

"Yes," said Zabulon, "because he was born in Bethlehem at the time appointed by the prophets, and the wise men have seen his star."

"He must be very beautiful, although he is so small; dost thou not think so, Zabulon?"

"It is written that he shall be the most beautiful among the children of men."

"I shall go to see him," said Lilith.

* * * * *

When night came, Lilith enveloped herself in long black veils; and the bracelets and circles of gold upon her arms and ankles, the collars about her neck, and the precious stones with which she was covered, shone through her veils as softly as the stars in the sky. And thus Lilith resembled the night, whose name she bore; for in Hebrew "Lilith" signifies "the night"!

Lilith found Zebonda and her husband, Méthouel, in prayer. Both seemed filled with great joy! Lilith bethought her of a ruse.

"Hozaël is very well," said she, "and I shall bring him back to you to-morrow. But since you know where to find the Messiah, lead me to him. I am come to adore him."

Méthouel was a simple man, little disposed to think ill of others, so he replied: "I will show you the way, Princess Lilith."

* * * * *

When they reached the spot where the infant lay, Lilith was greatly astonished, for she expected to see something extraordinary and magnificent, without knowing exactly what, and she only saw a hut built against a rock, and in this hut an ass, an ox, a man who appeared to be a workman, a woman of the people, beautiful, yes, but pale and delicate, and poorly clad. And in the manger, lying upon the straw, was a little child, whom at first glance she thought like any other child. But when she drew nearer, she saw its eyes; and in those eyes a look not that of a babe; an infinite sweetness, more than human, and she became aware that the stable was only lighted by the light which emanated from him.

She said to the young mother: "What is your name?"

"Miryem."

"And your little boy?"

"Jesus."

"Will you let me kiss your little boy?"

Lilith stooped and kissed the child upon the forehead, and Miryem was a little vexed that she did not kneel.

"So," said Lilith, "this little child is the Messiah?"

"You have said it, madam."

"And he will be King of the Jews?"

"It is for that God has sent him."

"But then he will make war and kill many men, and he will dethrone King Herod or his successor?"

"No," said Miryem, "for his kingdom is not of this world. He will have neither palaces nor treasures; he will not inflict taxes upon the people, and he will live like the poorest fisherman on the Lake of Gennesareth. He will be the servant of the poor and humble. He will heal the sick and comfort the afflicted. He will teach truth and justice. It is over hearts, not bodies, that he will reign. He will suffer, to teach us the price of suffering. He will be the King of Love, for he will love all men. And he will teach those who are tormented with a longing which this world cannot satisfy, where their poor hearts can find peace and joy. And no doubt he will have a throne."

"Ah, now you see!" said Lilith, still resisting.

"But," resumed Miryem, "the throne will be a cross. He will die upon a cross, to expiate the sins of men, so that God, his Father, may have pity upon them."

Lilith listened in astonishment. Slowly she turned her head towards the manger. The babe was gazing at her; and, vanquished by the caress of those deep eyes, she murmured: "No one ever told me those things before," and falling upon her knees, she adored him.

"I know," said Lilith, as she rose, "that King Herod will search for the child to kill him. Take the ass, and fly. I will pay its master!"

* * * * *

Every one knows that the Princess Lilith was one of the holy women who followed Jesus on the day of His sacrifice, and that little Hozaël was one of the first disciples of Christ, the Saviour. ETHEL DICEY.

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The Russian Spy

BY
JOHN K. LEYS,
AUTHOR OF
"The Tenth of June,"
"In the Toils,"
etc.

"SO you are going back to England, Mr. Thompson?" said my host, Michael Ostranovitch. "Do you go by Königsberg?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then perhaps you would not mind looking after a young lady, a sister of my friend Varinski"—he introduced a tall, long-haired man with a wave of his hand—"M. Varinski, Mr. Thompson. She is unfortunately obliged to go to England without an escort. In this weather, too!"

Of course I bowed, and said that I would be delighted if I could be of any service, and would feel honoured if Mademoiselle were placed in my charge.

So it came about, and on the journey Mademoiselle Lovna Varinski told me she was going to England to be a governess in a family of distinction.

"You surprise me!" I exclaimed. "I understood that ever since Mademoiselle Ixe came to our country, the British matron has fought shy of Russian governesses."

"Mademoiselle Ixe?" she said, with a questioning look in her pretty brown eyes.

I told her the story.

The girl's face flushed as she listened; her lips parted; her breath came faster; I could see that she had clasped her hands tightly together under her wraps. As I finished, her eyes flashed fire.

Her expression, joined to one or two details that had seemed to me a little odd, set me wondering whether my companion was a member of the proscribed society.

"One cannot help sympathising with those Nihilists," I said, with some idea of drawing her out.

She looked at me with an alarmed expression in her eyes.

"You forget that we are in Russia," she said quietly, and changed the subject.

I found her an intelligent girl, and altogether a charming companion. We talked of many things, but I noticed that as often as the conversation verged on political topics she adroitly turned it into a safer channel.

When dinner was served in the dining-car I proposed that we should sit down together, but this my companion declined. She had sandwiches and a flask of claret in her travelling-bag, she said. I found it impossible to shake her resolution, and, a little piqued at her obstinacy, I went myself to the dining-car.

Opposite to me, as it happened, was an acquaintance I had noticed on the platform at St. Petersburg—Nicolas Petrovitch. His face wore a look of ill-concealed anxiety. His short, stubbly grey hair, rising straight up from his forehead, stiff as an oak fence, contrasted queerly with his rosy cheeks and smooth chin.

"Mr. Thompson," he said, bowing politely to me, "may I presume to congratulate you?"

"On what?" I asked bluntly, giving him my hand.

"On your marriage," he returned, putting a fat, dimpled paw into mine.

"My marriage!" I exclaimed.

"I beg ten thousand pardons!" cried he. "I jumped to the conclusion that the lady you were travelling with must be your wife."

"You jumped a little too far, then," said I. "No; the lady you spoke of is going to England. My friend Ostranovitch asked me——"

Here the waiter, placing a hot dish on the table, must have let fall a drop of scalding gravy on M. Petrovitch's hand, for he started violently, and then looked up at the man with a scowl on his face.

"I really beg your pardon," said my neighbour, rubbing his hand vigorously with his napkin. "You were saying that your friend——"

"Put the young lady under my charge as far as London. She is going to be a governess in an English family."

"Indeed! She looks very young to have such a post. But Mademoiselle Ostranovitch——"

"Her name is not Ostranovitch," I interrupted. "She is Mademoiselle Varinski."

"Well, whatever her name is, I suppose you prefer her society to that of a stupid old fellow like myself. It is of no use to ask you to smoke a cigar after dinner."

"I shall be happy to do so," I returned.

"It will be a change to you after talking to a charming young lady for six hours. I hope she proved to be a good conversationalist."

"She is most intelligent, most charming," said I; "and she knows how to hold her tongue, too. On Russian politics, for example, she would not utter a word."

"Really!"

Petrovitch passed me the decanter, and I filled my glass.

"Yes, I have had a pleasant journey, thanks to Mademoiselle Varinski," I said, in answer to a remark of my companion's. "Poor thing! Her face at times wore a sad expression. I fancy she has seen trouble. Once, when I spoke of a Nihilist heroine her eyes seemed to burn. Perhaps her father, or brothers——"

I paused, conscious that I was going too far; and changed the subject.

Dinner was just over when the train stopped. It was the last stopping place before we reached the frontier station. I got out to buy a newspaper, and returned as the train was starting. To my surprise Petrovitch was seated opposite to Mademoiselle Varinski, and was talking to her earnestly.

"Please yourself, madam," he said to her as I entered the carriage. "If you do not immediately hand over the papers I know you have in your possession, I will

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denounce you to the authorities here, and they will send you back to St. Petersburg."

Suddenly he made a dive at her muff, seized it, fingered it all over, tore out the lining, and removed some papers which had been hidden there.

The train began to move.

"Stop!" I cried, placing my hand on his arm. My object was to delay till we were clear of the station, and then take the papers from him by force.

He threw off my grasp, and the next moment I was looking into the muzzle of a revolver.

"Stand back!" he shouted. "Fool! I belong to the St. Petersburg police."

"Ah!" cried I, affecting the utmost surprise; "that is a different matter altogether."

One sad reproachful look from the brown eyes followed me. I took no notice of it.

The train moved on; and the spy sat down to examine the papers he had taken from the Nihilist messenger. Although I had thought it best to preserve an air of indifference, I was profoundly moved by what had happened; my self-reproach was keen. To think that my unguarded tongue had brought this poor girl into trouble! Besides, she had been placed under my care. A nice guardian I had proved!

"This is more serious than I had supposed," observed Petrovitch. "You'll have to go back to St. Petersburg after all," he said to the girl with a grin. My blood fairly boiled.

What could I do to help her? What—what could I do?

Suddenly an idea darted into my brain. I rejected it as totally impracticable. I was not used to the work. I should bungle it, and only get myself into trouble. My nerve would not bear me out. Then I thought of that white-faced creature opposite me the inmate of a Russian prison, the prey of——

I rose, and turning round opened my travelling bag, which was in the rack overhead, and took from it a flask of brandy, and a small phial containing chloral. Being a victim of the demon Neuralgia I never travel without it. Concealing the phial in my hand I opened the flask, poured out some brandy, and drank it; and then (disregarding an eloquent look from Petrovitch) wrapped myself in my Inverness cape, and throwing myself down at full length pretended to go to sleep.

If I had been wearing a common overcoat I could never have managed it. But under the friendly shelter of the cape, which left my arms free, I found it easy to unscrew the flask-stopper with one hand, while I uncorked the phial with the other. To pour the contents of the phial into the flask was more difficult, but with a little patience the thing was done.

Then I roused myself up and took another pull at the brandy, affecting to drink more than I did. This time I met Petrovitch's look, and smiled, and handed him the flask. To my unspeakable disappointment, instead of emptying it, he took only about half of what it contained.

"Finish it!" I cried. "I can get more when we arrive at the frontier."

But he shook his head, and I feared to press him to take more.

I lay back in my seat. He did the same. The train rattled on. He closed his eyes.

I waited for a quarter of an hour, and then touched the spy's leg as if accidentally. He did not move. I did the same thing again, pushing briskly against him. He never stirred.

The next instant I was on my feet, and had my hand in the pocket into which I had seen him thrust the revolver. I unloaded it, set my heel on the trigger and broke part of the mechanism, then opened the window and threw it out.

"Quick!" I cried to Lovna. "We have only ten minutes. They will wake him at the frontier."

"Then I am trapped—and you, too!"

The look with which these last words were said would almost have recompensed me if it had been so!

"Not yet!" I whispered. "Get out your needle and thread, if you have such things in your bag."

By this time I had possessed myself of the spy's pocket-boot. All papers proving his connection with the police I tore into fragments, and sent after the revolver. Those which he had taken from Mademoiselle Varinski, with the exception of two, I placed inside the newspaper I had bought at our last stopping-place. It had never been read, and still wore the innocent appearance of having come fresh from the bookstall. The two documents I kept back were revolutionary tracts, such as are smuggled into Russia in thousands. One of them I placed inside the lining of the spy's hat. The other Lovna sewed up in the skirt of his overcoat, taking care not to do the work too neatly.

Hardly had this been done when the train ran into the frontier station. Petrovitch did not awake. We alighted, and I at once took Lovna into another carriage.

Then I waited as long as I dared, for every moment that the spy slept was more precious than gold. When I saw that he would be roused in two or three minutes I sought out the superintendent of police, and told him that I thought it my duty to inform him that I had travelled from St. Petersburg in company with a very queer individual. This man and I had had some talk, I said; and when he saw that my suspicions were aroused he declared that he belonged to the Russian secret police.

A smile passed over the official's visage as I said these words. It was next to impossible, from his point of view, that an agent of the police should proclaim his true vocation to a stranger. Petrovitch's story was already discredited.

"He was asleep when I left him," said I; "I will take you to his carriage."

"Is it a common trick of criminals to pretend to belong to the secret police?" I asked, as we walked on.

"Not very. But I have heard of it. Very often they have been employed as spies for a time, so that the deception comes more easily to them."

"This is the carriage," I exclaimed, as the bell rung opportunely. "I must go, or I shall miss my train. The man is middle-aged, rosy face, smooth-shaven, iron-grey hair—you can't mistake him!"

"Stay!" cried the superintendent, holding my arm as I was rushing away. "Where are you going?"

"To Königsberg. If I am wanted telegraph to me at the Imperial Hotel. Name—Arnaud Polerache."

As our train moved out of the station I saw Petrovitch, hatless, wild, gesticulating, borne along the platform, the centre of a group of policemen. One of them carried the spy's hat in one hand and the coat in the other.

I turned to congratulate my comrade.

She had fainted.

At Königsberg, where, for safety's sake, we separated, I handed her her papers, which I had carried with me folded up in the fresh newspaper; and she gave me in return a souvenir, which I shall keep as long as I live.

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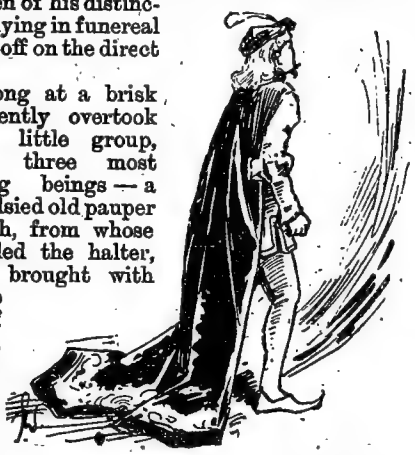
The Humming Top.

Translated from the German.

Count Geierflug, the mightiest minister of the realm, had breathed his last. His final moments on earth had left him looking somewhat pale and worn, but had in no respect diminished his pride and aristocratic elegance of bearing. Attired in a gold embroidered coat, such as men of his distinction wear when lying in funereal state, he started off on the direct road to Heaven.



Marching along at a brisk pace, he presently overtook and passed a little group, consisting of three most wretched-looking beings — a white-haired, palsied old pauper woman, a youth, from whose neck still dangled the halter, which he had brought with him from the closing scene of his life drama, and a little hump-backed consumptive boy, five or six years old, who, from time to time, glanced lovingly at a toy clasped close in his hand.

Count Geierflug arrived at the gates of Heaven, and politely addressed St. Peter.

"Pardon me," he began, "I would merely beg to inquire——"

But the former apostle and present keeper of the Celestial Gates interrupted him sternly:

"It's not your turn. The three behind there, whom you passed on the road, come first."

"Before me! I am Count Geierflug, the prime minister. I have the title of excellency, am knight of innumerable orders, member of various learned societies—and——"

"Up here we recognise neither knight nor scholar."

"Yet your Reverence was a kind of knight yourself, and wielded a dashing blade in the affair of Malchus."

Peter silently regarded the smiling speaker.

"And your Reverence was also a quasi—scholar—or author—or——"

"On earth I was only a poor fisherman."

"And yet," continued the Count, with a profound bow, "your Reverence's Epistles are even more celebrated than the world-renowned letter of Mme. de Sevigne."

Again St. Peter surveyed the flatterer in utter silence, but with so penetrating a gaze that the false courtier's eyes drooped beneath it.

In the meantime the three pilgrims had arrived.

No sooner did St. Peter see the boy's innocent face and crippled body than he said kindly:

"Run in, little one. This is the right place for you."

The apostle then turned to a thick book, upon which, in golden letters, was marked "Ledger."

"What is your name?" he asked the old woman.

"Brigitte Stegmaierin, if you please, holy Saint Peter," she replied, with a courtesy.

"Precisely—Brigitte Stegmaierin," replied St. Peter, poring over his ledger. Then in a grumbling tone he continued: "Debit—Has a bitter, bad tongue of her own. Credit—She is wretchedly poor."

"Poor!" cried the old crone, weeping and flinging up her arms. "God is my witness, that is true; and the holy Saint Peter himself knows that poverty is a gnawing pain."

"Well, well," said the apostle gently, "go in, granny, go in. In there, there is no more poverty or pain."

The young man with a halter round his neck now stepped forward.

"Your name," demanded St. Peter.

"Veit Kratzern."

"Stole a gold bracelet," read the apostle, with a frown.

"Item: A purse full of money.

"Item: The contents of the contribution box of St. James's Church."

St. Peter scowled fiercely at the youth, who shook like a leaf in the blast.

"Credited: He did it all without the slightest doubt at the instigation and intreaty of his sweetheart. H'm! Did you love the woman so very much?"

"Ah!" faltered the boy. "I could never tell you how much I——"

"Enough!" broke in St. Peter. "Don't talk to me about it. Be off, will you, out of my sight."

"Pardon me," he began.

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"What! In there?" and the thief pointed towards the Gates.

"Well, yes. Only make haste or I may repent my weakness."

Through the briefly opened portals the fair forms and pitiful faces of two shining angels were revealed. One of them tenderly wiped the tears from poor old Brigitte's eyes, while the other, murmuring mild and compassionate words, removed the rope from Veit Kratzern's neck.

"Now we are ready for you," remarked St. Peter to the Count, turning over leaf after leaf of the ledger, and suddenly exclaiming in a horrified tone:

"That looks promising, indeed Column after column of debit items, while nothing stands to your credit—absolutely nothing."

The Count began pompously:

"I have advanced the commerce, manufactures and agriculture of my native land. I have protected and promoted arts and sciences. I have built churches and schools and orphan asylums and hospitals and poor houses and——"

"Peace!" cried St. Peter angrily. "All that is charged fast enough not to your credit, but against you, because it was done from ambition and selfishness, and ostentation and hypocrisy."

"My life's best work," continued the Count, still more proudly; "how I made my fatherland great and glorious beyond all lands on earth, I do not need to mention, for I presume my fame has long ago ascended here."

"Your fame," retorted St. Peter, with increasing indignation, "has not reached us, but the groans of dying youths have risen to us from your battlefields, and from desolate homes the despair of mothers and brides; and, I tell you, wretch, if you have nothing better than this to urge, you are a lost man."

The Count grew still paler, and had not a word to say for himself.

At this moment the little boy, lingering on the threshold of Heaven, called out:

"Mr. Peter! Mr. Peter!"

"Are you still there, my little man?" returned the apostle. "Why do you not enter?"

Instead of replying to this question, the little fellow said:

"Mr. Peter, do you see this humming-top?"

St. Peter replied indulgently:

"Pray, how came it there?"

"My mother laid it in my grave with me," said the child seriously. He then picked up his top, re-wound it, and extending the top temptingly towards the apostle, said:

"Mr. Peter, if you will let the Count go in there with me, I will let you spin my top."

"Do you know the Count, child?"

"Of course. It was the Count who gave me the top."

"Ah! Tell me how that happened, dear boy."

"Once I was sitting at the door, eating my bread, and when I had finished I began to cry. Just then the Count came driving along in a beautiful blue and gold coach with four grey horses. And the carriage stopped, and the Count looked at me and said:

"'Are you hungry, little boy?'

"'No,' said I. 'I have just had my bread.'

"And the Count said: 'Why are you crying?'

"And then I said: 'I am so lonely. Father and mother go off to work early in the morning, and don't come home till late at night, and the children won't play with me because I am so slow.' Then the Count said that he would bring me something to play with. And in a little time he came back with the top, and we made it spin, the Count and I together; after that I never cried any more."

St. Peter made no reply, but buried his head in the ledger, muttering:

"I know he's rather old fogeyish in his accounts, our old bookkeeper, Gabriel—still, we have always been able to rely upon him. Ah, I was sure of it," he exclaimed joyfully; "here it is, on the very last credit page: 'Gave a day labourer's crippled child a top—commonly called a humming-top—and with great kindness and gentleness showed the boy how to spin it.'"

With almost youthful eagerness St. Peter seized his red pencil and drew a broad line through the whole long list of sins and offences, and the next moment the Count, clasping the child's hand, entered the Kingdom.

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The Taming of an Amazon

SO far, during the eighteen years of her somewhat lively existence, no one had quite succeeded in making Miss Dolly Durwood out. The almost childlike slimness of her figure, and the exquisitely innocent expression of her sweet little oval face, were strangely at variance with the daring sentiments she gave utterance to, and the acts by which she was perpetually demonstrating her defiance of the conventionalities. Left parentless at the tender age of fifteen, she had come three years later into the possession in her own right of a rather handsome fortune, as well as of the roomy old family mansion at Tarrytown, where, with two ancient and wholly dependent maiden aunts for company, she ruled things like any little countess, living exactly the life that suited her, and sometimes shocking the neighbours, I fear, by the wildness of what the two ancient aunts aforesaid were accustomed to speak of, awe-strickenly, as her "goings-on."

As a figure in the humdrum daily life of the rather aristocratic little suburb, Miss Durwood was entirely unique. To the majority of the inhabitants she was known by the rather irreverent *sobriquet* of "Dolly the Dare-devil," and, truth to say, she earned it. She could ride like a circus-woman, and had a way of dashing at breakneck speed through the quiet streets at all hours of the day and night, occasionally adding interest of the performance by singing at the top of her voice. It was her boast that she could drink more champagne than any of her male acquaintances without going under the table. She could swim or row. She could shoot and fence, and box like a professor.

It is scarcely needful to say that this most extraordinary young woman proved a source of sad dismay, at times, to the two estimable aunts. She was quite hopeless, however, for when one of these good old ladies attempted a reproof or a remonstrance on account of some exceptionally outrageous performance, the niece would say simply: "Aunt Tabitha,"—or Aunt Mona, as the case might be—"I'm my own mistress—please remember that." And then in the next five minutes she would perpetrate some ridiculous prank, or maybe fall to hugging the old lady like a young bear, and kissing the wrinkled face into smiles again.

For men, as lovers, Miss Dorothy Durwood had no use whatever. When a man proposed to her, which he always did on two weeks' acquaintance, if he did at all, she simply put out her delicate little red tongue at him and laughed. If he "cut up rough," as she called it, she simply dropped him for good and all; if he accepted the situation sensibly, they remained good friends—a very charming arrangement.

But there had been just one occasion—the episode was now eighteen months old—when Miss Dorothy Durwood's heart had beaten faster beneath her pretty white bodice, and the colour had left the smooth cheeks, under the ordeal of contact with a congenial specimen of masculinity. His name was Ernest Dacre, and he was an artist by profession, with a pretty amateur knack of singing tender love ballads in a very acceptable baritone. Dacre first piqued the Tarrytown beauty into friendly relations with him by his indifference.

Then, just as she was beginning to flatter herself that this white-browed young artist with the smooth cheeks and boyish yellow hair was beginning to unbend a little, she had shocked him and everyone else by some madcap act. He had left the next morning without saying good-bye, and the memory of his face, with the queer look, half of sorrow, half of disdain upon it, brought a sting of resentment even yet.

To-night, however, she was radiant as she stood in her sumptuously furnished room. She smiled at herself, and her big black eyes gleamed as her arms were raised above her head to coax the waves of rebellious dusky hair into becoming coils. For they were to meet again. The fastidious Mr. Dacre, the only living man that had dared to possess the power to make her feel ashamed of herself, was making one of a skating party, and she had vowed to herself—well, if Mr. Ernest Dacre really did care anything about her, the young woman's resolutions boded ill for his peace of mind.

The river was frozen half the way over, and at the point where they took to the ice, at a boat-house they

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had reached by a viaduct reaching from the Durwood grounds, the surface was as smooth as a sheet of polished glass. To one, Travers, fell the joyous task of adjusting the steel blades to Miss Durwood's dainty boots. Then the two went gliding off together, leaving Dacre to wrestle with his skates, which were of the now obsolete "Acme" pattern and required careful adjusting. He had finished his task and was standing up preparatory to a start, when he saw Dorothy coming whirling towards him alone, as gracefully as a swallow, with great, long, outside-edge sweeps, and he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

The girl's cheeks were as red as peonies. She was glowing with the exercise. "Don't you intend to skate, Mr. Dacre?" she asked.

Dacre did not answer her question. "Miss Durwood," he said anxiously, "that ice is not safe."

"And why not, pray?"

"I saw it bend as you came over it."

The red lips curled scornfully. "Coward," she sneered. "You're afraid, and I hate you. Stay here in security, Mr. Misanthrope, and watch me enjoy myself."

Away she flew across the river towards the open water. Dacre was about to follow when Travers dashed up and came to a stop by grinding his heel into the ice. "I say, old man!" he ejaculated, holding up a wet foot, "this ice is treacherous; I just stuck a hoof through and——"

He stopped. Dacre's face had turned ghastly white, and he had started across the river as though a thousand furies were after him. Before Travers could move the artist had turned and yelled at him: "Don't follow me, for Heaven's sake. Get a rope!"

No man of any race ever skated as Dacre did that day. Every atom of the force of a long athletic training went into each stroke. With body bent and hands clenched he flew on.

* * * * *

Miss Durwood had not skated into the open water, as he had feared. She had simply encountered a stretch of ice, barely an inch thick, and gone through. She was now clinging feebly to the broken edge, with her head just above the surface, for the swift tide below was making persistent efforts to drag her down.

Now, Dacre had not meant to skate into the water by any means, but to fall upon the ice and pull the lady out. His momentum, however, was so great that he could not pull up, and into the hole he went, plump; and with such force, moreover, that his head went against the sharp edge of ice on its further side, gashing it cruelly. Half stunned, he turned, and, clasping the girl's waist with his left arm and gripping the ice with his right, felt an instantaneous improvement of spirits from the contact. "The coward whom you hate," he managed to gasp, "has come to keep you company."

The look of dumb reproach he received from the black eyes set him to work.

With a mighty effort he raised the girl, and forced one of her knees upon the ice. It promptly gave way.

He twined the fingers of his left hand in her hair and raised his own knee to the ice. It smashed again, and there they floundered, with fingers cut and bleeding. It began to look hopeless.

Then it was that the active brain of the artist conceived a great idea. Before him lay some five feet of thin ice; beyond that it was firm and secure. He whispered to the girl: "Can you hold on for a minute longer by yourself?"

She nodded feebly.

Supporting himself by extending his left arm over the ice, the young man pushed his right hand beneath the water till it met his upturned foot. He unclasped his skate, and thanked Providence at that instant for those simple, old-fashioned clamps. Then, with this weapon, he proceeded to smash the ice in front of him, giving himself and his companion a mighty lurch forward with every blow. They were nearly up to the firm ice when he felt his senses giving way, and in a sort of dream fastened about Dorothy's waist the slip-knot of a rope that, it seemed to him, had been let down from Heaven. Then he lost consciousness.

Travers had been in time.

* * * * *

They took the drenched and bedraggled pair to the house. The crowd of yokels that followed the grim procession to the gates obligingly dispersed thereat and departed to the inn to discuss this latest freak of the young lady on the hill.

Dorothy was laid in one room, with the antiquated aunts weeping distractedly over her, and Dacre in another. The doctor, after prescribing for the girl, turned his attention to the still unconscious young man, whose case seemed much more serious. The cut on his forehead was an ugly one, and the three other men looked grave as the doctor bent over him to stitch it up.

Just as the stitching was finished, and Dacre had delighted them all by heaving the first deep sigh of approaching consciousness, there was a commotion outside, and in another instant Dorothy, pale-cheeked and wild-eyed, with about half of her drenched clothes on, and followed closely by the two tearful and expostulating aunts, stood in the doorway.

"Don't dare to stop me," she cried passionately, "this is my house, and I'll do as I like in it. I *will* go to him. He saved me, and I called him a coward, and said I hated him." Dacre turned his head feebly, seeing which, the impetuous and wholly improper young woman sprang forward and flung herself on the bed beside him like a whirlwind. "Dear, *dear*, DEAR!" she sobbed, seizing his head fiercely in her two hands, to the infinite horror of the doctor and the two aunts, "you'll forgive me—yes, you will. I said I hated you. I didn't; I *loved* you—yes, I did, but I didn't know it. And I'll be good, and sweet, and quiet, just like your sister, if you'll only"—a sob—"forgive."

"Dorothy, my darling," said one of the aunts, with a quiver in her voice and a handkerchief at her kind old eyes, "you'd better come away, my dear."

"I won't!" snapped her niece. "I'm here now, and I'll stay. I won't leave this room till I leave it as his promised wife. If he won't promise me that, I'll die here. But, oh, Ernest, you poor thing, *you* may die. But you won't die, will you, Ernest?"

The left eye of Mr. Ernest Dacre opened to its fullest extent, and then closed softly. "My dear," he whispered faintly, "I have no intention of dying just at present."

"I thank," said Aunt Tabitha to Aunt Mona some hours later, "I thank Heaven that that crazy girl has got someone to teach her sense at last."

"I echo the sentiment," replied her sister meekly.

RICHARD SIBERT.

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The Romance of a Door-mat.

I am a door-mat.

He generally comes home from the club at about two in the morning. It is a great relief to feel that He is at home, as I can then resign myself to sleep without the fear of being trampled upon unexpectedly. When I know it is coming I do not mind it, as one can become used to anything.

When He first bought me the embroidered muslin curtains in that window over there were new. So was His wife, for that matter.

It appears that She is a door-mat also, although it must be some new kind. I know this, because I heard a lady who was calling say to her companion just as she pressed the bell:

"He simply walks on Her, my love!"

And the other said:

"I would never stand it, my dear!"

Which is all great nonsense if She really is a door-mat, as they are never consulted in the matter.

For a long time after this I regarded Her with curiosity. It seemed a strange thing for a door-mat to look out of a window night after night, with a perfectly white face, instead of lying down quietly that people might trample upon Her.

But I suppose there are door-mats and door-mats.

After a bit She was not as much at the window, and I saw two flitting shadows upon the embroidered muslin curtains quite often of an evening.

And I knew that a certain man with a guilty face, whom I had often seen with Him, was with Her then. I never liked the man. He had a way of looking about carefully before he tiptoed up the steps. One would say he was a thief.

Now there are feet and feet.

And I always hated his. When he stepped upon me it was always with his toes, and his narrow-pointed boots gave me many a vicious dig. I can stand heels, but I hate to be dug with these narrow-pointed toes.

He never walked in that way. He had a careless, square way of putting His foot on me which never hurt. And, as for Her feet—the feet of the Woman Door-Mat—I vow, I actually loved Hers. Dear little, careless feet!

"Such a heavy, heavy heart!" I heard Her whisper one night, as She ran across me. But Her little feet were light, for all that.

Once the man with the guilty face came home with Her just at dusk. And, as usual, he walked like a thief. And for an hour I saw their shadows on the curtains.

As he passed over me in coming out, digging his miserable pointed patent-leathers into me as he went, he was smiling, and I heard him mutter:

"I shall win Her! She shall be mine!"

Fool!

For he had told me his secret. I, his enemy, knew that he was trying to steal His Woman Door-Mat.

Queer, was it not? If he had really wanted a door-mat, why not have stolen me?

A few days before Christmas an intimate friend of mine came, the snow, and I talked it over. And between us we caught him.

I was simply immaculate that evening when the Guilty-faced Man came, for the snow had been falling softly, thus effacing every footprint. But as soon as he passed, tripping lightly from his cab, and tip-toeing over me with his narrow-pointed shoes, why, the snow waited, and I held those footprints as I had never held anything before.

And at ten he went, stepping upon me once more. The fool.

At midnight He came.

And it was such a white winter's night, with the snow and the starlight, that He noticed the prints upon me, as I intended He should. And I told Him all.

"I know that foot," said He. "It is the narrowest I ever saw. He knew I was not here. What——"

And He unlocked the door in a hurry and rushed within.

In the morning, when the housemaid aired the little library, the muslin curtains whispered to me that there had been trouble within the night before.

"Who called?" asked He.

"Don't you know?" replied the Woman Door-Mat nonchalantly.

"I was told that."

The Woman Door-Mat shrugged Her shoulders.

"He left me at the club."

"So he said."

"And knew—I was not here?"

"Naturally. He has usually selected those times for calling."

"My most intimate friend," said He, very slowly, looking at Her in sorrow. "And you infer——"

"Is it not always a man's most intimate friend who—but he knew as well when a woman is neglected?" And the Woman Door-Mat left the room.

But He sat there all through the night and early morning hours.

At last, on Christmas Eve, when they were returning from a ball together, He carried Her from the cab to the door, running lightly up the steps and setting Her down upon me. They were both laughing.

And as He placed Her upon me He kissed Her, while Her white arms stole out from Her furs and clung to Him. I knew that they were happy. Even a door-mat would have known that. It is absurd to be as happy as they were. There is no poetry in happiness.

And as He leisurely took His key from His pocket to unlock the door, He said:

"Dozie, I told you I was told that, you remember, the other night?"

"And who?"

"You are standing on him," He laughed.

Looking down She drew Her lace skirts aside, and glanced from me to Him, and then back again.

"That blessed, blessed door-mat!"

And then She sank upon Her knees, draggling Her laces in the snow. And kissed me. Oh, it is true. I swear it!

And I—a door-mat—thrilled wildly at the touch of those soft, smiling, pink lips. Probably no other door-mat in town has ever owned a like experience. Probably I shall never have another. Yet I am content.

One kiss!

But I have heard that there are kisses, one of which is worth a whole long lifetime, filled with the platitudes of other lips.

And that is my romance.

M. F. M.

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THE BURDEN OF A BORROWED PERSONALITY.

By WINIFRED GRAHAM.
Author of "Six First-Class Passengers," "Through the Valley," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

Who Cares for Caste in these New Days of Level?

A girl standing alone, looking wistfully into space and conjuring up a picture of the past. Herself and a man. The latter, dark, young, handsome; the former, fair, blue-eyed, and comely. The past was only yesterday.

"Why did he ever come here?" she asked, beating her temples with her fists. "Why did he look at me, speak to me, love me?"

She dug her nails into her palms to prevent herself shrieking aloud in her bitter condemnation of fate, as she realised how utterly and entirely she had fallen a victim to a stranger's whim.

Myra Grey recalled the events as she hid her misery and humiliation in the silent wood.

Alec Gordon had come to Ligeia Abbey as the solitary guest of old Mrs. Lysaght, an invalid lady of doubtful temper and peculiar habits, who spent the morning in bed, and the afternoon in a bath-chair, drawn up and down the terrace by a patient footman.

No wonder Satan found some mischief for his idle hands. Myra, with her unquestionable beauty, stepped from the lodge door and opened the gates as he rode by on the first morning, and Alec Gordon treasured the image of that striking personality through miles of dust down a country lane.

She had flung wide the gates of temptation, and without a thought of danger he stepped in to play with fire and meet his divinity on common ground.

He expected to find a bread-and-butter miss, an innocent country girl, knowing nothing above dairy work and scrubbing, ready to laugh away an hour with any good-looking youth that might fall in her way. But beneath the peach-like bloom and sunny smile of the lodge-keeper's daughter Alec Gordon discovered a mind!

None of the Society drones with whom he mixed daily had ever touched him as Myra did. Her conversation, like deep draughts of sea breezes, gave him an utterly new sensation. He felt he could face or dare anything for her. Only the night before, in that same spot, he had sworn to make her his wife, as they stood heart to heart and lip to lip under the shadow of the trees. The warning voice of the Abbey clock had aroused them, and Alec tore himself away, while Myra ran as a hunted stag through the gloom, with a strange ringing noise in her brain, and a stifling sensation at her throat.

The following morning, the sound of wheels attracting her attention, she hastened to the gates, and pushing them slowly back with bowed head, watched Alec Gordon drive away. The carriage returned from the station without him. He had caught the early train to town.

Just one glimpse into an unknown Heaven, and then to be thrust back—back!

She pressed her hands over her heart, raising her face to the sky. "Oh! Alec," she moaned, "Alec!"

The words, wrung from her by the bitterness of despair, fell on eager ears. Some one had followed her faltering steps, and in a moment two strong arms clasped her, while Alec Gordon's passionate lips pressed Myra's cheeks.

"My darling, did you doubt me?"

His words thrilled her, though she had merited their reproach.

"Why did you go?" she faltered, laughing through her tears.

"Why?" he said tenderly, reverentially, drawing something from his coat. "Have I not your promise, dear one?"

She gazed at the paper, swaying a little, like a flower on a tall, slim stem.

She dug her nails into her palms.

He thought how lovely she looked, standing in the sunset's glow.

"Is it a licence?" she asked, in an awed tone.

"What else should it be? A warrant for the arrest of your spinsterhood. Myra, are you afraid?"

He asked the question suddenly, an anxious look on his face, for she had bent her head, toying with some dead leaves. She caught her breath, her emotions were an echo of his.

"I would dare all for you, if you really love me?"

She glanced first at the green depths of foliage, then half timidly into his eyes. He reassured her with caresses and fond words.

They seated themselves on the ivy bench, weaving a thousand bewildering plans of action for the immediate future.

That night she did not run home through the woods, but walked down the broad drive, her head erect, and her breast swelling with pride and joy.

Love, the great beautifier, had irradiated her features, she seemed to be walking on air, over the smooth, yellow gravel.

She passed through the porch into the lodge, where her father sat smoking by the open window.

"You are late to-night, lass," he said, looking up as Myra entered.

She avoided his glance, and busied herself at the

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dresser. Myra and her father were the only occupants of Ligeia Abbey lodge.

"I have a letter here," he said, smoothing a sheet of paper on his knee, "from your Aunt Marian. She finds it that dull living alone at Hammersmith, and, feeling as how the country air would do her good, suggests taking up her abode with us."

Myra turned quickly. Fortune, indeed, favoured her.

"Oh! father, how nice. You were always so fond of your sister Marian."

She knelt by his side, laying her cheek on his dusty sleeve.

"Well, my girl, that's as you please," he replied, surprised in his turn. "But Aunt Marian has a mind of her own, and as you keep house and do things your own way, I thought possibly it might go against you."

"Well, father dear," continued Myra, "it is like this. I have lived a quiet country life so long in our little village, that if Aunt Marian would look after you I could seek a situation and see the world."

"I never thought you had a taste for service," he answered; "but there, I suppose it's natural for young people to make their own way. If you've set your heart on it, I won't gainsay you."

"Thanks, dear," she murmured, kissing him lightly on the forehead, "and now I will get your supper, for it is late."

She sang while arranging the evening meal. Her voice and movements were so light-hearted that the man in the window turned more than once to watch her in her work. He had straight features and a good shaped head, wore a shabby cloth suit, yet aspired to some sort of refinement.

"What's up with you Myra?" he asked at last, catching the glad light in her eyes. "Is it the thought of leaving your old home what's pleasing you, or has Phil the postman been at you again for an answer?"

Myra tossed her head indignantly; that Phil should have dared to aspire to Alec Gordon's affianced wife, seemed now an act of grossest impertinence.

"But he isn't good enough for you, my girl," said her father proudly, looking at his daughter's splendid physique. "No, if I were a woman with them eyes, I'd set the Thames a fire, and look to something 'igh and grand, before taking to the slavey trade."

For a moment Myra felt tempted to tell him, and her heart went out to her father as it had never done before. But she drew away, and began hastily cutting a loaf of bread.

"How is it," he said musingly, "that you're not the same as other girls in our station, Myra? Don't shake your head, lass. I'm not a fool, and I sees your dainty little feet and hands, and hears your voice—that different to mine. How have you managed it, eh? You're educated, too, and can tell me of things such as I never heard before. Where do you get your books and your learning?"

"Shall I let you into the secret?" she cried suddenly, dropping the bread knife, and stealing softly across the room to his side, "only you must promise never to repeat it!"

"Never!" he declared, with a chuckle, "fire away, my girl."

"You know what odd ideas old Mrs. Lysaght has about everything, and what a hermit she has become?"

"Yes, indeed. There's no company to speak of at the Abbey now."

"Well, Mr. Lysaght had a huge library built on to the house, which is stacked from floor to ceiling with thousands of books. They were his hobby, and he died in that room—suddenly, from an attack of heart disease, while stooping over a pile of volumes. Ever since, Mrs. Lysaght has held it sacred. No one but the maid enters, who dusts and cleans it every morning, opens the window, and locks the door as she leaves. Mrs. Lysaght only goes in on the anniversary of her husband's death. It is built on the level of the ground, and every day of my life I creep under the shadow of the wall, steal through the open window, and find myself there alone, yet surrounded by companions, friends.

"Shall I let you into the secret?"

Great Heavens! how I have read, book after book, which had been left unopened for years. I am as well up in literature as any lady of the land. I have systematically smuggled myself into that room since childhood. It has been the one delight of my life, which made the monotonous hours fly. It gave me scope and interest, I have been to every quarter of the globe, and talked with kings and queens. It was a separate existence, a study apart, and I loved the great crowded shelves, the spice of danger, the fear of detection, and the exultation of success."

The old man gave a low whistle, and threw up his hands.

"My word! if the missus had caught you!" he cried.

Myra indulged in a low laugh.

"I would have given her a lecture on greed," she declared, with a defiant shrug of her shoulders; yet Myra's callousness was assumed, for she cherished a wholesome dread of Mrs. Lysaght. The exhilarating prospect of the wonderful unknown future made her peculiarly confidential and conversational that evening.

Mr. Grey began to wish as she drew his chair to the table, and placed the supper before him, that Aunt Marian would remain at Hammersmith for the rest of her natural existence.

He was too busy feeding himself, however, to notice that Myra ate nothing, but sat watching him with an expression of mingled amusement and sorrow.

"I am going to town to-morrow for the day," she said, pouring out a tumbler of cold water, and drinking it in feverish haste. "I want to make inquiries about a place I have seen advertised, and I have saved plenty of money for a third return."

The man looked up from his plate with a startled expression.

"Going to town?" he said, and his eyes expanded as he spoke.

"Yes," she replied, a little sharply, fearing to find her aims, hopes, and desires frustrated. But her tone forbade argument, and lighting his pipe silently, her father walked out of the house. She watched him smoking in the garden, with a strange smile hovering round her lips. Then she went up quietly to bed, a great joy reigning in her heart.

"To-morrow," she said; "to-morrow! My wedding-day!"

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CHAPTER II.

His Wedded Wife.

Myra returned from her visit to the great city flushed and happy, a bride in secret.

Alec was with her in a first-class compartment, which she was to vacate before reaching Eversley station.

"My darling," he murmured, "I can hardly realise you are my very own."

She looked down on the ring soon to be torn from its lawful resting-place and hidden in the folds of her simple grey dress.

Two tender arms clasped themselves suddenly round his neck, two lips that would be an angel's did not passion make them human, pressed his fervently.

"Husband!" she whispered, lingering over the word. Then with a little catch in her voice: "How is it all to end, dear, after this great beginning?"

"Worldly wisdom must solve the problem of our future happiness," he replied, gazing into the depths of her violet eyes; "and worldly wisdom at the present moment means silence. Our prospects might be ruined for ever if I made my marriage known immediately. You see, my uncle, Julian Shields, is very old, and a bachelor. He has made me his heir, and I shall inherit the family estate and a large income to keep it up. He is most eccentric, and there are other nephews to whom he might transfer his property if in any way I displeased him. Already he has one foot in the grave, so to upset him now would be suicide."

Myra's face grew troubled.

"Then we are to keep our secret till this man dies?" she asked tearfully.

"I trust not," he replied, aware of the sacrifice he was demanding at her hands. "But if only we could contrive some plan for you to meet my people and prejudice them in your favour before they know who you really are. My mother has such narrow ideas."

"Let me think," said Myra, pressing her hands to her forehead. There was silence for a moment, then she looked up. "You are right Alec, Mrs. Gordon would never acknowledge me as her daughter, probably never consent even to see me as your wife. If we met on equal ground, then I should have a chance. I would try to do you credit, but am I clever enough to act?"

She turned to him with an angelic smile.

"Clever!" he cried. "My darling, if I could get you to Saxbury Cross, my mother would be head over ears in love with you in a week. My Uncle Julian is coming to stay with us shortly, and, of course, if you were to win him over, then we *should* be on the top rail."

"I have it!" declared Myra. "Say that you met me at Ligeia Abbey, as a guest of Mrs. Lysaght, and persuade your mother to invite me to stay. I will change my identity entirely. Instead of Myra Grey, the lodge-keeper's daughter, I will be a lady who has moved in the best circles. You always have your own way at home, surely you could work this, Alec?"

"By Jove! It isn't a bad idea," he exclaimed.

"I will be Miss Granville—that was always a favourite name of mine. Myra Granville! Doesn't it sound nice?"

Alec was delighted at the thought of so enchanting a scheme.

"Myra Gordon," he laughed, "*alias* Granville, *alias* Grey! We shall find ourselves in a perfect maze of complications."

"But the first, the greatest step, has been taken to-day," said his wife, her lovely mouth dimpling into smiles. "Already I have paved my way to departure. Father thinks I've been to London about a situation, and the situation shall be Saxbury Cross."

"It is a daring venture," he replied, "but safe enough in your hands, dearest, if only I can conceal my mad and hopeless devotion to this new Miss Granville."

"It bewilders me," she whispered, "the thought of finding myself among people with whom I have never associated—to wear the purple and fine linen of an aristocrat, leading the life of which I have only read and dreamed. Oh! what a glorious transformation! I must order a regular outfit in London, and take it down with me from there. I shall not be too proud to let you pay for it, now that you are indeed my husband, and it is a necessity of our daring speculation. But, Alec, what if, after all, your mother refuses to invite me?"

"I will see to that," he replied confidently.

"Saxbury Cross is your river house, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, quite an ideal place on the banks of the Thames, where my mother recruits after the season. I am sure you will like it. If Providence crowns our plans with the success they deserve, I shall feel really satisfied for the first time in my life."

"Don't make too sure, dear. Satisfaction is never realised in this world, content and pleasure, but not real genuine satisfaction. Something is always wanting—a hope for the to-morrow that never dawns."

Her words cast a momentary gloom over his spirits, as he clasped her to him in a tender yearning embrace.

"How strange that you should have ever come to Ligeia Abbey," she said at last, with a sigh of long suspended peace, as her head rested on his shoulder.

"Yes. Now I bless the fate that gave me a violent attack of influenza, and sent me to your bracing climate for change of air. I did not feel up to joining a house party, or there were dozens of places I might have gone to. Mrs. Lysaght has known me since a boy, and often asked me down to Eversley. On this occasion I availed myself of her offer, knowing I could have rest and quiet, and little thinking I should find my life's love at the Abbey gates."

"Isn't it deliciously romantic?" she sighed, "extraordinarily uncommon! I feel almost on the verge of Heaven, I am so happy."

Just at that moment the train steamed into the station before Eversley, and Myra sprang hurriedly to her feet.

"I must say good-bye to the nice cushions," she cried laughingly, waving her hand towards the blue-covered seats, "and return to my natural sphere, the dusty unattractive third. 'Lowliness is young ambition's ladder,'" she quoted. "I don't believe you ever read Shakespeare!"

He watched her flitting down the platform, with passionate longing eyes. He dared not even accompany her to the door, for fear of observation.

"What a bright glad soul she has!" he thought, "so delightfully unconventional, so spontaneous and refreshing!"

He looked over the fair meadow country as the train steamed out, but saw only Myra's face in the green fields, and red brick gabled houses, curtained with virginia-creeper, untouched as yet by autumn's blood-dipped fingers.

When Alec Gordon arrived at Eversley, Mrs. Lysaght's old-fashioned chariot met the train, and for a wonder Mrs. Lysaght's heavily-craped black bonnet was within.

"I am feeling so much stronger to-day that I ventured

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out for a drive," she told him, as he took his seat, watching Myra's slim figure in the distance, wending its way down the dusty road. "It is really very annoying, Alec, that you should have been obliged to take that fatiguing journey to town two days running, on business. But you look remarkably well. I think the Eversley air has worked wonders."

"I never felt better in my life," he declared. "My mother will hardly know me."

"I am afraid you have had a very dull visit—a sadly monotonous time, with only an old woman for a companion."

"Oh! not at all. I've enjoyed myself immensely. The country is so beautiful! It has been one long, delicious daydream."

The old lady looked at him sharply through her glasses.

"That isn't like you," she said. "I never heard you make a sentimental remark before in your life. 'Delicious daydream!' it sounds quite mawkish and dreadful. I hope you have not inherited your dear father's one and only failing. Such a good, genuine, companionable fellow, and a most devout churchman, but was seized in his old age with a desire to write little sonnets and ballads. He even went so far as to publish them in papers, of which your poor mother sadly disapproved. I remember him puzzling me dreadfully with some rubbish he called: 'The Rondeau Redoublé,' 'Pantoum,' and 'Kyrielle.' Bah! I despise such twaddle."

"I believe he wrote well, but you need not fear I have a genius for poetry. I could not coin a rhyme to save my life."

"Do not be too confident, the taint is in your blood!" snapped Mrs. Lysaght. "Poets, I consider an immoral race, screaming themselves hoarse with lays of love to women they have never seen, and exciting the young not infrequently to suicide, or worse still, social degradation!" Her words seemed almost prophetic, as she lashed the children of the muse with her tongue of scorn. "But tell me what you have been doing in London," she continued, as they passed through the Abbey gates.

Alec could see his father-in-law digging up pansy roots, and the relationship struck him as so absurd that he burst into a fit of sudden uncontrollable mirth.

"Why are you laughing?" asked Mrs. Lysaght.

Alec's face grew grave again, as he realised the crisis he had reached in his life.

"I was picturing myself one of the long-haired tribe, penning a triolet to the charms of Ligeia Abbey."

"Good," she replied. "We seldom practice what we ridicule. I am sure you must be pining for your dinner, and I have ordered something indigestible for a treat."

He looked over the fair meadow country.

"Thanks. I am quite off the sick list by now," said Alec, thinking of his poor little Myra sitting down to bread and cheese.

Mrs. Lysaght's caustic mood gradually expanded into benevolence, and during the evening she became quite extraordinarily pleasant and confidential, enlarging on her money affairs, and complaining of her trustees. She recounted the death-bed scenes of all her family, from her great grandmother downwards, and gave Alec a sermon on the subject of love and matrimony, to which he listened with good-humoured indifference.

"You *do* look well!" she declared again, when the family annals were exhausted, and he still retained a smiling tolerance. "The quiet routine of Ligeia Abbey has done you all the good in the world. Like the majority of young people in the present day, you live yourself out. Your pleasures become a labour, and all capacity for enjoyment is worn to the bones!"

"My days are not in the yellow leaf yet," he replied cheerfully; "besides, it is a pity to moulder and rust."

Then he became suddenly silent and constrained, for his thoughts were with the lodge-keeper's daughter, who was gazing through her latticed window at the distant lights of Ligeia Abbey.

CHAPTER III.

The Power of Self-Culture.

Myra was dusting the parlour, looking in her clean print dress the incarnation of youth and happiness.

"Father, it is all fixed," she said, glancing at a crested envelope peeping from the pocket of her apron. "I am to go to Saxbury Cross, and have had a letter from Mrs. Gordon engaging me this morning. If I don't like it I shall come home again."

"I'll be missing you, lass," said the old man, shaking his head. "But there, no one shall say that Joseph Grey stood in his girl's light when she wanted to earn her own living. It strikes me, Myra, this lady is a bit fussy and particular in her way of engaging servants. She's had you to see her in London four or five times at least. Why couldn't she make up her mind about you at first?"

Myra flushed as she thought of her various interviews with fashionable dressmakers, and the delightful days shopping in town.

"All is fair in love and war," she told herself. "My deception must continue."

"You are right, father," she said. "Mrs. Gordon is peculiar, and it depends greatly on my own tact and common sense whether we hit it off, or if Saxbury Cross proves only a brief episode in my life."

"How many servants do they keep?"

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"I—I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Well, you're a rum lot, and no mistake! What did you do about a character?"

"I haven't got one," sighed poor Myra, becoming momentarily more confused.

"Then the sooner you get one the better, my girl."

"Mrs. Gordon knows Mrs. Lysaght, so it will be all right."

"You seem to have gone about it in a queer way, but I ain't one to hinterfere. Now, when your Aunt Marian comes she'll put you through a fine catechism, and as like as not see you to the place herself. She's that curious!"

For a moment Myra's blood ran cold, then a gasp of relief involuntarily escaped her.

"Aunt Marian does not arrive till the day after I leave," she vouchsafed; "and by the way, father, Mrs. Gordon did not like the name Myra. She said it was too fanciful."

"Just what I told your dear mother, when she read them novels, and talked much as you talk now, of things above her station. 'Myra ain't a fit name for our sort,' says I. 'Let it be Jane, or Anna, or something holy, such as Ruth and Elizabeth.' But she just closes her eyes in them last moments, and repeats 'Myra' two or three times, and then she was took."

He brushed a tear from his wrinkled cheek. Though he did not read himself, he had treasured his wife's books, with their torn covers, for years.

"I am glad she thought of that name," said the girl; "it seems to give me individualty. I know three Elizabeths and five Janes, and Phil's sister is Anna Ruth."

"What will Mrs. Gordon call you?" he asked.

"Her servants go by their surnames, and as the lady's maid is 'Grey,' I am to be 'Granville.' It sounds rather well, doesn't it?"

"Too 'ighflown for my liking."

"But she must be humoured, father, so mind! whenever you write (which won't be often), address the letter to *Miss Granville*. While I am at Saxbury Cross I bear that name. You won't forget?"

"Not if you leave it written down, for I don't know 'ow to spell it."

Myra laughed as she committed it to paper, in a large legible hand.

"And now," she said, "I am going to take a farewell of the dear old library, a last look at those book companions of my childhood. I love them all."

"Take care the missus doesn't catch you," said her father, as she slipped away.

Myra crept under the thick bushes till she reached the open window. Alec had gone, and for the moment her life felt blank and empty. The long low room with its shelves of well bound volumes appealed to Myra as friends. All her young life's love seemed buried in their leaves, and they would go out into the world with her—a sacred memory. She realised the intellectual endowments she owed to their teaching, the width and breadth they had imparted to her narrow sphere.

At first she read for pure pleasure, and from a certain feminine curiosity. Then the idea of self-culture came to her, not as a dream, but a possibility. But for her secret act of daring, Myra might have slumbered to the end of life. Something she came upon while searching through those well-stocked walls stirred and awoke a new conviction.

Two powers of the human mind make self-culture possible, the self-searching and the self-forming power. To begin with, she learnt that her own nature was worthy of observation, and saw in herself the germs and promises of a growth, to shoot beyond the little boundary of her cottage home.

She penetrated into her nature, and discovered a spirit, at first so shadowy and unreal, that only a dark vague chaos appeared. But Myra had fixed her eyes on perfection, and from that day her intellectual progress commenced, expanding year by year. There seemed a natural elasticity in her being, a desire to be built up. She cultivated a perception of beauty, feeling its all-pervading presence in the clouds and the stars and the setting sun. The flowers gradually stirred some new interest in her heart, and the green blades of grass, and the trees in the wood, (till it became akin to worship. She saw her father living blind to the fair earth and glorious sky. He was like the tenant of a dungeon; he could not comprehend or feel the loveliness and grandeur of the world around him.

"You do look well," she declared again.

Besides all this, Myra cultivated the power of utterance and speech. She began to notice that Joseph Grey never opened his lips without breaking a rule of grammar, and his uncouth tones jarred on her sensibility.

It must not be imagined that the correction of these errors in herself had not caused Myra unrelaxing toil and attention. Her culture had been acquired under grave difficulties. As she stood, perhaps for the last time, in the silent library, such a flow of gratitude leapt up in her heart, that she stretched out her arms spontaneously and pressed her lips to the lifeless walls.

She would have liked to fling herself at the feet of Mrs. Lysaght and bless her for the privileges received under her roof, but she knew too well the horror any such revelation would cause that wholly selfish and egotistical lady. Myra could picture the curl of Mrs. Lysaght's lip as she confessed her daily intrusion—the rooted resolve to fasten on to knowledge as her Great End—to make the most of the powers God had given her, which burnt like living fires in her soul.

"No; the dead should be thanked," thought Myra—"the dead man that built this room, and the dead of past ages who wrote these books."

Through their undying talent she had obtained intercourse with superior minds. Milton had crossed the threshold to sing of Paradise to the hungering country girl; Shakespeare opened the worlds of imagination for her benefit; while Franklin enriched her with practical wisdom. Myra held her breath at the great thought, and then as she stood dreaming, her favourite authors passed before her in the morning sunlight—a solemn procession—while she grasped their hands and said farewell. Walter Scott was the last in the line, and she stopped him to contemplate his inexhaustible mind. How she had been chained to his pages, steeped in forgetfulness of cares and sorrows, her whole life brightened by his magical creations!

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"Good-bye," she murmured, half regretfully, watching the vanishing figures of her phantom friends. As they faded Myra knelt under the shadow of their great works and thanked God for what she had gained.

Then she walked thoughtfully back to the lodge.

"Society," she told herself, "is divided into two classes, the high born and the vulgar, separated from one another by a great gulf. I shall have overstepped the gulf when I enter Saxbury Cross as the guest of Mrs. Gordon. The path to perfection is difficult for all; there is no royal road for rich or poor. I may be the medium to bring her to wider, freer views."

"Myra! Myra!"

It was her father's voice.

"The cat's upset the kettle and scalded herself. How slow you are, Myra!"

"I am coming, father."

CHAPTER IV.

Weaving the Tangled Web.

Saxbury Cross was a large ivy-covered house on the river banks. Roses yellow and red clustered round the windows and over the picturesque balcony, trailing their green thorny branches down a winding staircase leading to the lawn. A long slope of well-kept turf ran the whole length of river frontage, here and there dotted by gaily-flowered beds, while weeping willows stooped to kiss the soft ripples of the Thames.

The peaceful glow of a summer evening was over everything, shadows crept under the trees, and sun rays lingered on the gravel walks. Across the river a sound of distant bells and the rush of a far off weir mingled faintly with the occasional splash of an oar.

A little girl was sitting in an arbour overlooking the river, her short frock barely covering her knees, and her legs coiled under her on a deck chair.

Penelope sped off, followed by the poodles.

Two extravagantly affectionate poodles nestled at her side, one pawing the long brown locks on her shoulders, the other licking two sunburnt hands shading a laughing face.

"Go away," she cried. "I won't be kissed any more!"

"My dear Penelope, do send those tiresome dogs to the stables," said her mother.

In a moment the girl's arms were clasping them both, and lavishly caressing each eager black nose in turn.

"I wish Uncle Julian wasn't coming," she retorted passionately. "He always brings that horrid Satan with him, and the poor twins have to be banished, unless they wish to be torn to pieces. I wonder you allow such a vicious brute to run rampant over the house."

"You know your uncle will not come without him, so what is the good of talking?" replied Mrs. Gordon, a tall elegant woman with raven black hair, untouched by grey, and a figure which would have done justice to a girl. "Take them away at once, Penelope, he may be here at any minute, and you know I am expecting Alec's friend—Miss Granville."

The child rose reluctantly, and whistled to the black poodles, who, anticipating their fate, had scampered away, romping and bounding, amongst the flower beds.

"No wonder Uncle called his dog Satan," she declared solemnly. "Mr. Danby said he was sure he was possessed of a devil—the dog—not uncle I mean."

"What an idea!"

"Well, Mr. Danby is a clergyman, and ought to know." She nodded her head wisely. "Besides, mad dogs are dangerous, and even Uncle Julian owns he is cracked."

"There, run away and give the twins in charge," said her mother, smiling.

Penelope sped off, followed by the poodles, leaping up and barking. She had only just gone, when an old man leaning on a stick came tottering down the garden path, followed by an evil-looking Chinese edible dog, who kept close to his master, his bushy coat standing up red and very bristly.

"Alethea!" cried Julian Shields, putting up a gold-rimmed eyeglass, and scrutinising her face, "as young as ever and as beautiful, yes, as beautiful!" he chuckled, giving her a skinny bloodless hand.

"Bring tea out here," said Mrs. Gordon to the servant, after returning her brother's greeting. "You will have a cup before dinner, Julian?"

"It is late, quite late," he replied, with his customary habit of repeating words, "but I'll not refuse your kind offer. Tea is my weakness you know, Alethea; we all have our vices."

He called back the retreating servant, and pointed to his dog.

"Satan will take a bowl of milk," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"And a little bread in it, broken up small; no crust, remember. You see, Alethea, I always make myself at home with you. Satan's teeth are decayed; he lives almost entirely on sops."

Mrs. Gordon stooped to pat the dog's head, but he showed his well-worn teeth, and she withdrew her hand accordingly.

"It is only his manner," declared Mr. Shields, with a lenient smile. "Satan is rather affected, and has adopted the satirical tendency of the age."

As he spoke, he drew a third chair forward for the animal, who rose sulkily on to the cushions, with a suspicious glance at Mrs. Gordon. She edged away.

"Where is Alec?" he asked.

"Driven over to Settleworth station to meet a friend of his, whom he asked me to invite here. He says she is very pretty, and I am sure to like her. They met at Eversley, while he was staying with Mrs. Lysaght."

"I am glad she's pretty; ugly people spoil my digestion—one of my weaknesses again, Alethea. I've

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a perfect mass of them ready at a moment's notice, I assure you."

"Here is your tea, Julian, with the dog's milk. I had mine an hour ago. Cream and sugar?"

"Neither, thanks; good pure tea, unsullied by et ceteras." He balanced the cup in one quavering hand. "Oh, yes!" quickly changing his mind, "pass me the cream jug, will you?"

She handed it to him.

"Ah! this is what Satan likes," he declared, emptying the contents into the dog's bowl. "He is a thorough *gourmet*."

"Mamma! mamma! Miss Granville has arrived; Alec is bringing her through the balcony."

Penelope rushed up excitedly, for she had caught a glimpse of Myra's rose-garlanded hat, and heard a low musical voice. "I know she is simply sweet," she added in an undertone, "and amusing, too. Alec was laughing. Oh! I beg your pardon, Uncle Julian, I quite forgot to say how do you do!"

She bent down dutifully, and kissed his wrinkled cheek.

A moment later and Myra's graceful figure advanced across the lawn.

As her eyes met Mrs. Gordon's she smiled charmingly, and a strange thrill passed over her when Alec's mother took her hand. For the moment Myra feared her presence of mind would desert her, and the whole imposture shrivel and die under Mrs. Gordon's clear gaze and pleasant words of welcome.

But Alec came quickly forward and joined in the conversation, eagerly watching Myra's expression, in which he read no sign of faltering.

Julian Shields tottered to his feet and scrutinised the new-comer.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Granville," he said, as Mrs. Gordon introduced him; "delighted, I'm sure. Eh! your first visit to this dear old place? Let me present you to Father Thames."

He pointed to the river. Myra gazed over the mystic tide, to the bright opalescence of the sky. The old man saw the dreamy look in her eyes.

"You are a lover of the beautiful," he said. "The flowing stream and soft summer night have a certain fascination."

"What is fascination?" said Myra thoughtfully. "I have often tried to analyse it, and failed."

"You've only to look in the glass to know," he replied with a little cackling laugh.

Alec overheard.

"What! compliments already?" he cried jokingly, putting his arm through his uncle's. "Come, this will never do, you get younger every day."

Julian Shields liked his nephew's free and easy manner. It was part of Alec's charm.

"What a lot of boats you have!" said Myra, turning to Mrs. Gordon.

"Yes, you must try them all. Penelope is a very good skipper, and will punt, canoe, or sail you at any time."

"But you have not introduced me yet," said a plaintive voice at her elbow.

Myra held out her hand to the pretty child, and kissed her upturned face. A sensation of joy filled her being—Alec's sister had pressed her lips.

"Your face seems strangely familiar," croaked Mr. Shields. "Are you one of the Granville's, of Fort Granite—the Leicestershire branch, I mean?"

Myra looked wildly round to Alec for support, and he changed the subject by intentionally stumbling against his uncle's gouty foot.

"What a clumsy beggar you are!" he muttered, as his nephew apologised.

"Were you at Ascot last year, Miss Granville?" he continued. "You are so very like a niece of Lady Maitland, I remember seeing there. Her aunt would not introduce me for fear I should lose my heart at first sight. The young lady was engaged to a fellow in the 16th Lancers, and we lunched in their tent."

"I could not go last year," replied Myra, flushing. "I was in the country."

"Dear me, what a sultry night!" almost groaned

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Granville."

Alec. "I feel like a martyr of old, boiled alive! I shall rig up a tent on the lawn and sleep out of doors."

"Don't be absurd," from Penelope. "You might get rheumatism, and die."

"It is too hot for reason."

"Yes," put in Myra, flicking away the gnats, "my thoughts melt into a shapeless mass when thousands of thirsty midges are biting me!"

Mrs. Gordon declared it was time to go in and dress, and Myra accompanied her, leaving Alec with his uncle.

"By Jove! that's a pretty girl," said Julian Shields, watching the retreating figure, "a confoundedly pretty girl! Where did you pick her up, Alec?"

"Miss Granville lives at Eversley."

"Very fine eyes, and a beautiful under-lip—but put not your trust in women Take this wrinkle from me," lighting a cigar, and puffing at the tormenting flies: "They are as weak and unstable as these rings of smoke.

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No woman is worth as much as that old dog in the chair. He is wife and child to me."

"I am glad you have such a faithful friend, uncle."

"Yes, and a tiresome friend, too, at times. I am obliged to reserve a carriage for him when travelling. Satan objects to the passengers—or they object to him. He hates everybody but his old master—that is what draws me to the creature. He would have a piece out of your leg now if he dared."

"Where would you like him to sleep?"

"With me, of course. He'd howl the house down if I turned him out of my room. But oh! how he dreams.

Penelope came down before dinner to say good-night.

My dear boy, I assure you that dog has kept me awake for an hour sometimes in the night, killing an imaginary cat. By the way, I hope there is no tame kitten about?"

"Yes, Penelope has a little Persian, with a pie-bald tail."

"It must be sent away, then, or Satan will eat it on the spot. Mind you see that it goes, Alec. I should be extremely sorry if my presence here caused any unpleasantness in the house."

Meanwhile, Myra, for the first time in her life, was donning a dinner gown.

She felt a little shy, and rather odd about the neck, but her dazzling reflection in the mirror reassured her.

"This is the life I was made for," she thought, running her eyes over the spacious apartment.

"I feel like an actress masquerading in a gorgeous scene, soon to be shorn of its splendour. The walls ought to fall about my head and crush me."

But as she looked at the bright eyes and delicate colouring of Myra Grey, in Myra Granville's soft white draperies, the words of Thomas Otway came to her mind. "Oh! woman! lovely woman! Angels are painted fair to look like you." Her heart beat higher.

The maid was putting the finishing touches to her toilette, when she turned suddenly, an anxious inquiry in her eyes.

"Is this dress becoming?" she asked. "I have not worn it before."

"Yes, miss. White, I am sure, is your speciality."

"Miss!" How queerly the word re-echoed in her brain.

"Would you advise me to wear this fichu over my—my throat?" she asked falteringly.

"Oh! no, miss. It would be a sin to cover such a lovely neck."

"Thank you," said Myra simply.

Then she went down to the rose-tinted drawing-room, and lounged in a low arm-chair, under a deep red lamp, casting a rich glow on the pink walls.

Beside her sat her husband, and as she conversed with him in the ordinary tones of a casual acquaintance, she pressed her hand to her heart, and felt something small and round lying upon it, the simple band of gold that linked their fates in one.

Penelope came down before dinner to say good-night, and perched herself on the arm of Myra's chair, already feeling quite at home with the new comer.

"You live at Eversley, don't you?" she said.

Yes," replied Myra.

"I thought so. I went there once with Mamma. We were staying at Emberton, five miles away, and drove over one afternoon. Where is your house?"

Myra considered a moment. She felt herself growing hot all over.

"It is—near the station," she answered vaguely.

"A pretty place surrounded in trees?" cried Penelope.

"No; you are thinking of Hazel Court."

"Yes," put in Mrs. Gordon, "where the Montagues live. Do you know them, Miss Granville?"

"They are never there," answered Alec hastily. "Mr. Montague was obliged to go abroad for his health, and his daughter married. The old place is going to rack and ruin."

"I think you are mistaken, Alec. He lends it to his cousin for the hunting," continued Mrs. Gordon. "I dare say you have met that celebrated sportsman?" turning to Myra. "His wife, Mrs. Bryce, is very charming, and entertains tremendously."

"I don't remember having seen her at Eversley," said Myra. "I dare say I was away at the time."

"What is the name of your house?" asked Penelope.

As she spoke the clock struck.

"Your bed-time, old lady," said Alec, pulling the child off the chair, and saving Myra from answering an awkward question.

"Need I go yet?" asked Penelope, turning to her mother. "I like talking to Miss Granville." Then attacking the visitor afresh: "You *will* tell me about your home, won't you? Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"I am an only child."

"You must have been very dull when you were little. Where did you go to school? because there is no school in Eversley. I've got so much to ask you!"

"Wait till to-morrow," replied Myra, as the dinner gong sounded, "and I'll think of some stories."

"I never heard anybody cross-question like Penelope," said Alec. "It is a perfect habit, and she ought to be broken of it. Don't humour her, Miss Granville, for if you do you will not have a moment's peace while you are here."

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"I must resort to invention, for it is so long since I was at school, I have forgotten all about it."

Mrs. Gordon looked at the visitor's youthful countenance.

"A very long time, I am sure!" she said smiling.

CHAPTER V.

An Old Fool.

Without doubt Myra was a decided success at Saxbury Cross, her husband having schooled her so effectually that she managed to keep up the character of Miss Granville with little exertion.

For the first few days he frequently caught a bewildered look in her eyes, responding unfailingly to their secret appeal. But these occasions became few and far between.

The new life developed a surprising amount of tact and quick comprehension in Myra. Everyone was fond of her, and especially Julian Shields.

"It really is quite a nuisance," she confided to Alec. "Your uncle follows me about like a faithful dog. He may be a very dear old gentleman, but his society is apt to pall."

They were drifting under the Saxbury Cross willows, Alec leaning on his oars.

"I cannot realise I was once Myra Grey," she said, her eyelids drooping half shyly under his glance.

"Let us stay here out of the stream, dearest," he replied, fastening the boat to a bough. "It is so seldom I can have you to myself. Why, the amount of time you spend with Uncle Julian and that terrible dog is most wearisome."

"Do not complain," she whispered, smoothing his forehead with a feathery blade of grass. "It is just as well he likes to be with me. I assure you last night on the balcony, after dinner, you would have thought he was an amorous boy."

"Lunatics thrive in the moonlight," said Alec, capturing her slim hand, crushing the wild forget-me-nots she held.

The glory of the summer evening cast a spell over them, and for a while they sat watching the sun in a crimson cloud dyeing the mirror below with red. Sedges and rushes rose above the shallow water—it was an ideal spot.

"What a heavenly evening to love!" she murmured romantically.

Alec, more prosaic, looked from the picturesque sunset into Myra's eyes.

"What a heavenly little woman to love!" he said, with a sigh of content, half wondering, as he scanned her daintily gowned figure, if this could be the same Myra he won in the Ligeia woods.

"How have you managed to change your personality?" he asked.

"That is a puzzle," she said. "It quite perplexes me! I do not understand it in the least. I cannot analyse the change, but it has taken place gradually. I seem to have grown into an unknown sphere, and lost touch with my past self."

As she spoke Penelope's figure appeared on the lawn, and a shrill childish voice called: "Alec!"

"What is it, Pen?" he asked, looking up from the boat.

"Uncle wants Miss Granville, and he is in an awful rage at not finding her."

"Look here! Can't you keep him out of the way?" said her brother coaxingly. "We didn't ask Miss Granville here to bore her to death. I'll give you a shilling if you do."

The child consented to the bribe, but demanded her shilling first.

Alec tossed it on to the bank laughingly, watching it roll along the gravel path.

Before she could pick it up Satan had leaped out of some neighbouring bushes, and snatched the coin between his teeth.

"Good dog! good dog, Satan!" chuckled the old man, appearing as if by magic on the scene. "He always sticks to money."

"The old miser!" muttered Alec, as Satan scratched a hole in the ground for the reception of his spoil.

"You have been on the water quite long enough, Miss Granville, in that thin white dress," croaked Mr. Shields. "The sun has set, and a mist is rising. Won't you come for a stroll with me, and finish our interesting discussion on the elevation of the labouring classes?"

Myra consented with feigned pleasure. Julian Shields was the trump card on which all her aims and hopes depended, and she could not afford to refuse.

The old man, delighted at taking her from his nephew, hobbled away, leaving Alec to vent his wrath on the offending Satan and restore the stolen money to its rightful owner.

"What a shame!" cried Penelope, with a scornful glance at the retreating figures. "I wouldn't stand being monopolised by *him* if I were Miss Granville. She gets plenty of admiration without Uncle Julian."

"Plenty!" said Alec sharply. "Who else is there?"

The child laughed.

"Why, you silly boy, anybody can see you are in love with her yourself, and you'll be very lucky if she has you. She's the loveliest girl I've ever seen. Why don't you ask her, Alec? A cat may look at a king!"

"Go along, you little chatterbox, and mind your own business," he answered good-naturedly; and Penelope wondered why he gave her another shilling to add to Satan's.

Myra had wandered out of sight with her companion.

"Yes," he was saying, "your views are surprisingly intellectual, Miss Granville. So often nowadays the young people can talk of nothing but fashions and parties—I like the word 'party,' it reminds me of my childhood. But, to continue our subject, I quite agree with your opinions, and look myself for the salvation of the modern world in the elevation of the labouring classes. I see with joy new wants, principles, and aspirations beginning to unfold themselves. Have you ever visited among the poor?"

"Oh, frequently," retorted Myra. "I understand them well."

"And doubtless find the majority steeped in ignorance?"

"Yes," she replied, unable to explain away the tears in her eyes. "It is so hard for them to improve, Mr. Shields—harder than you can possibly realise. How should a half-famished, uneducated working-man, who toils for wages, think of personal improvement? He cannot cultivate the perception of beauty, and he has scarcely ever opened a book. I do not know one labourer in Eversley whose mind is bent on self-enlargement. They have no time to study or comprehend."

"You are contradicting yourself, Miss Granville; a moment since you said it was possible."

"Yes—then I was thinking of the women; but they must begin young—very young—before they are dragged down to the level of their fellows."

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"You have evidently considered the subject. I wonder you have time to spare a moment for those poor creatures so far below you."

"Indeed, they are very near my heart. I know their difficulties; I have seen so much of it."

"You are the last person in the world I should have pictured visiting the poor."

"Why?"

"You hate the seamy side of life, and love the beautiful." He took her arm. "Walk a little slower, my dear; I can't keep pace with you."

"I beg your pardon," said Myra humbly.

For the first time since arriving at Saxbury Cross her conscience rebuked her for the lie she was living. Misgivings, apprehensions, and piercing self-rebuke weighed heavily upon her spirits.

"You are the last person in the world I should have pictured visiting the poor."

"Do you think it wrong to step right out of your own walk in life and pry into another?" she asked.

"Certainly not. If you really take an interest in the lower classes, and do not visit them out of curiosity."

"But you would not like a poor woman to push her way into your circle? You would not listen to her?"

"I should, if she had anything sensible to say."

"Would your sister, Mrs. Gordon?"

"I can't answer for Alethea. She is so easily disturbed, and would probably pour out her indignation on the unfortunate wretch, with the Christianity one woman occasionally shows to another beneath her."

"How sceptical you are!"

"If anyone could make me otherwise it would be you, Miss Granville. My opinion of the weaker sex has gradually undergone a change in the atmosphere of your influence. 'A noble woman, nobly planned,'" he quoted, looking at her with deepest admiration. "I have discovered your chief charm, my dear, if you will forgive an old man's candour. It is the lack of affectation and conceit in one fair enough to tyrannise over the whole masculine race, and be forgiven. Take my advice, dear lady; stick to your unfailing good nature, as to health, youth, and beauty. It pays, Miss Myra—it pays."

"You are very kind," she murmured, lowering her eyes.

He took her hand and pressed it to his shrivelled lips.

"You have kindled new life in me," he said, "to enjoy the pure companionship of a genuine English girl is a stimulant!"

In her voyage of discovery after fresh impressions, Myra forgot her guilty conscience, now soothed to slumber by the soft words of Alec's uncle. She had come to conquer, and the victory seemed almost in her grasp. The distracting glare of day had vanished, and the twilight calmed her nerves.

"Will you be my friend for life?" she asked tremulously. "I should like you always to keep your present opinion of me. I want to feel that whatever happens in the future I may count on Mr. Shield's good word."

His face glowed with satisfaction and pride.

"There is my hand on it!" he said.

"Is it a compact?" she whispered, with a tender glance at the old man.

"For life!" he replied fervently.

She hardly knew how it happened, but Mr. Shields drew suddenly nearer, and pressed a hasty kiss upon her forehead.

Then dropping her hand, he turned and hobbled away, muttering: "I'm an old fool, by George! I'm an old fool!"

When Alec found Myra, she was alone on a garden seat.

"How thoughtful you look," he said, noting the far-away expression in her eyes. "Is anything the matter?"

"I was pondering over the problem of my changed personality," she replied dreamily, "and thinking of 'an old fool'!"

CHAPTER VI.

A Débutante in Secret.

"Are you fond of dancing, Miss Granville?" asked Alec's mother one morning.

"It is rather too warm this weather," she hesitatingly replied, not daring to confess her utter ignorance of the art.

She had dreaded this subject since observing a card for Lady Hayter's ball among Mrs. Gordon's invitations.

"It is Barbara's 'coming-out' ball," Mrs. Gordon vouchsafed, glancing towards Alec. "She will look lovely!"

"Is Barbara Lady Hayter's daughter?" asked Myra.

"Yes; the only girl, and as clever as she is beautiful. It is her eighteenth birthday. By the way, Alec, I want you to drive over this morning and leave my little present."

"What is it?" he asked indifferently.

"A sapphire bangle. You might take Miss Granville if she cares to go."

Myra brightened considerably.

"Let us try Olivette, the bay mare, in the buggy," Alec said, watching every change in his wife's face with a lover's quickness. "How soon can you be ready?"

"Directly. I'll get my hat at once."

Mrs. Gordon had risen from the table, and watched Myra as she tripped away.

"How charming she looks in that cool mauve cotton; it suits her admirably," she said, with an approving smile. "Lady Hayter was positively fascinated by your new friend, Alec, and she is rather difficult to please."

Myra returned, in a large muslin hat decked with flowers.

"I am ready," she said.

"Mrs. Gordon watched them go with a little sigh. She could not grudge Alec his happiness, though she had all a mother's fear of losing her only son.

As they drove off alone, with Olivette stepping out before them, Alec turned anxiously to his wife.

"Why were you so pale at breakfast?" he asked. "Were you nervous about anything?"

"I can't go to the ball. I—I must have a headache and stay at home!"

"Why?"

"Oh! don't you see, don't you know, I can't dance! Every lady dances as a matter of course, it is part of

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her education. How could I possibly go with your mother to Lady Hayter's, and expose my ignorance? Besides the etiquette of a ballroom would be Greek to me. I should not know what to do, or how to act. See what a burden I am Alec, a burden with a borrowed personality!"

"Darling, forgive me, but you are talking foolishly. Do you think for a moment I would leave you at home to-night? I will teach you to waltz this afternoon, you'll pick it up directly, and as to the etiquette of a ballroom, your wit will guide you. I have perfect confidence in my Myra."

Her face flushed with pride and pleasure.

"Do you really think you could show me the step to-day, when no one is looking?" she asked breathlessly, "and that I should not disgrace you to-night?"

"Don't be cruel dearest," he whispered. "You hurt me when you talk so."

Alec drew up at the door, gave in the parcel, and was turning to go, when Barbara ran out.

"Good morning," she cried, patting Olivette, and glancing up at Alec, "I see you have brought a parcel. I hope it isn't a present!"

She was a bright-eyed brunette with a very audacious smile, and the trimmest figure imaginable.

"Ungrateful girl!" laughed Alec, holding out his hand. "You ought to be very glad. It is as well to collect a few trinkets when you come of age."

"Come of age!" she cried indignantly. "Alec! what a horrid thing to say, when you know I am only 18."

"Well, 'coming out,' or something of that kind," he added vaguely.

"But people are too good," she declared deprecatingly. "I have done nothing but cut string and tear paper since I woke this morning. It is as bad as getting married."

"You have my deepest condolences," he replied, as she peeped up under her long lashes, with half veiled coquetry.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, addressing Miss Granville.

"No," replied Alec, as Myra shook her head. "We will wait until to-night, and greet you in all your *débutante's* glory."

"I have the loveliest bouquet," she cried, "an enormous shower of white flowers, with trails to the ground. I only hope I shan't trip over it."

"You will look like a bride."

"Yes," retorted Barbara, with an affected smile. "I always think a bouquet must be rather a comfort for a bride to yawn behind—such a fatiguing ceremony."

Alec gathered up his reins. He never could stand her when she tried to be funny.

"*Au revoir*," he cried, raising his hat, "till to-night."

"Take care you don't run over any stray illuminations," she said, waving her hand. "We are to have three thousand fairy lights down the avenue, and no end of Japanese lanterns."

"What do you think of Barbara?" he asked.

"Pretty," replied Myra.

And that was all they said.

That afternoon Myra slipped away with Alec, while in a far-off orangery he gave her a first dancing lesson.

Myra was light and willing, her husband persevering—most persistent. Before she realised the difficulty was surmounted she found herself spinning round and round among the palms.

"Let us try once again," she said, trembling with excitement. "Hurrah!" as he guided her across the stone-flagged floor, "I *can* do it, Alec!—I can dance!—hurrah!"

Her childish glee delighted him.

"You must not tire yourself out before to-night," he replied. "Reserve your energies, and win fresh laurels by looking your very best. You will wear the little necklace I gave you?"

"I have been almost afraid to lift it yet from its velvet resting-place; but this evening it shall glisten round my throat. Every day I open the case, and watch the diamonds sparkling like dew in the early sunlight. There will be more than one *débutante* at Lady Hayter's to-night."

Mrs. Gordon felt justly proud of her guest.

"What a charming gown," she murmured, looking her over after dinner; "and your necklace, too, how lovely! Was it your mother's, my dear?"

"No," replied Myra, biting her lips.

"How exquisite the garden looks!" said Mrs. Gordon, as they filed up the brilliantly illuminated drive, in full view of Lady Hayter's residence.

"It is a palace of light!" cried Myra enthusiastically.

Barbara stood by her mother receiving the guests, and Myra fancied as she took her hand that the girl's eyes were not quite kind. They only softened when they turned to Alec.

But a moment later he had passed on, still keeping close to the lovely Miss Granville.

"I will get you a programme, dear," he said.

"Is it a concert, then?" she innocently asked.

He gave a little start, realising the danger of the unsophisticated remark.

"No, no, a list of the dances—a card for your partner's names," handing her one as she spoke.

"May I say I can't dance the polka?" she whispered.

"No, pretend you don't care to, and for Heaven's sake do not attempt the *Pas de quatre* or Lancers!"

"If our secret were known," he whispered, as they moved away together, "I could not dance with you the whole evening as I intend, if you will let me."

"Why not?"

"Husbands don't as a rule monopolise their wives in public."

"I have several names already on my programme, though they are quite illegible. I really don't know how I shall find the gentlemen again!"

A chill feeling of alarm crept over Alec.

"You do not have to find them, they come for you," he explained, staggered by her remark. "Come, let us imagine we are in our orangery; you remember the step?"

"Don't speak to me, or you will put me out. Oh! Alec, you don't think my other partners will *talk* while we are dancing?"

"Most probably!"

He led her to the polished floor.

"Oh! it is so slippery," she whispered; "I know I shall fall!"

He swayed her gently round to the Blue Hungarian Band. But, alas! for Myra's memory, dancing with Alec at home was very different to recalling the step in the excitement and bewilderment of a crowded ballroom. Hot tears of mortification rose to her eyes, but she forced them back, as he guided her tenderly to the wall.

"I can't do it, Alec," she sighed. "It was all very well by ourselves, but here I get dismayed directly, and forget the step. I wish that I hadn't come. Oh, dear! What shall I do?"

"Would you like to try once again, darling?" he whispered, grieved for her disappointment.

"Not for all the world. I never felt so dreadful in my life. What excuse can I make for not dancing?"

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She clasped her hands over her fan, turning to him with troubled eyes.

"I don't know. How about a strained ankle—quite a slight strain, but painful when you dance?"

"Always untruths!" she murmured bitterly. "My path is scattered with them, such ugly black things! They are my fate, I suppose, and cannot be helped. As ye sow ——"

"Hush, dearest!" for Myra's voice was distinct and clear. "Take care what you are saying."

"May we go and sit down, or is it unusual while the dancing continues?"

"Of course not!"

He led her to a secluded spot, where they could be at peace.

"I don't see why you shouldn't enjoy the evening yet," he said. "We can sit out our dances, for the room is so crowded no one will notice whether we dance or not, and you can make some excuse to your other partners. I am afraid, dearest, I must leave you for my dance with Barbara. I had to ask her, but you will be all right if I take you back to my mother."

"Oh! yes."

No sooner had Alec left Myra than a *blasé* youth, with a fair moustache, sought her out, and declared it was his dance.

"I am sorry," she replied, "but I have strained my ankle—very slightly—which prevents my dancing. I hope you don't mind?"

"Oh! no; we can sit it out," he replied. "I have got a tennis wrist, so we are fellow sufferers in misfortune. I hate dancing. It's an awful bore!"

The girl looked at him with an amused smile.

"Then why do you come?" she asked.

"Well, you see, the Hayter's always invite me to Scotland for the shooting, so I must do the civil."

"How strange," said Myra, "to have so much pleasure and not enjoy it."

"Did you come with Mrs. Gordon?" he asked.

"Yes. I am staying at Saxbury Cross."

"Have you known them long?"

"No, only lately. I like Mrs. Gordon very much!"

"Yes, a wonderfully smart woman; and young Gordon, too, he's a right sort of chap. This little place has its topics of gossip, Miss Granville, and he is generally associated with our hostess's pretty daughter, Barbara. They say," with a lowering of his voice, "that there is likely to be a match in that quarter."

"Really!"

He led her to a secluded spot.

"Yes. He is with her now. Miss Hayter is the best dancer in the room."

"Does she care for Alec Gordon?" asked Myra.

"Oh, yes, it is well known, and Lady Hayter has set her heart on old Shield's heir."

"You seem well acquainted with their family affairs."

"Well, one hears of these matters in various ways; not that I pay much attention to them. But the Hayters and Gordons are old friends, and some think the engagement is already *un fait accompli!*"

Myra resented her partner's gossip. She disliked hearing Alec coupled with another woman. Besides, had not this man called Barbara "the best dancer in the room," while she could not attempt a step without feeling hopelessly at sea? It was galling to an extreme!

"For myself," he continued, "I do not admire Miss Hayter. She isn't my style. I like fair hair and light colouring, don't you know? That gipsy beauty does not appeal to me. Then she is so terribly all there—you can't deceive her; it's quite annoying."

"Why should you wish to?" asked Myra.

"You are so literal, Miss Granville. I was speaking metaphorically."

"I should think," said Myra slowly, looking him up and down, "that you very possibly do a great deal of harm in the world. All that silly idle gossip, which concerns no one, is likely to cause unintentional injury. I hate to hear people's names linked together for the sake of diversion. Miss Hayter is not a friend of mine, but as a woman it is my duty to defend her against the tongues of men!"

Myra took everything seriously, and the light chatter she met with in Society nonplussed her.

The youth with the light moustache gazed in amazement at his fair judge.

"By Jove! you're rather hard on a fellow."

"Do you think so?" said Myra. "I meant to put it politely."

"Are you so appallingly virtuous yourself that you never talk a little scandal?"

"Virtuous!" she laughed. "Oh, no; I am very wicked. I don't wish to be, but the stream leads me on. The river of life is deep, you know, and I was never a good swimmer. The current carries me down."

"Then forgive my chatter *re* Miss Hayter and your friend Alec Gordon. I am afraid I put my foot in it!"

"Put his foot in it!" thought Myra; "what could he

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mean? Had she betrayed her love for Alec to a stranger?" The idea was horrible.

"I wish you would fetch my fan," she said, changing the subject. "I left it on the sofa by Mrs. Gordon. I feel so hot."

"Certainly, with pleasure," springing to his feet.

She watched him go with a sense of relief.

Voices behind her attracted Myra's attention.

"You won't give me up because I am 'out'?" a pleading voice was murmuring, so closely hidden beneath the palm that Myra could catch its faintest whisper. "You know, Alec, we have always been good comrades, and if I do flirt occasionally with other people, it is only because I see so little of my platonic friend!"

"I like you to flirt," he answered. "It keeps you happy and light-hearted."

"What a *gauche* remark!" replied the girl, "if you had any sense you would be angry. A jealous man is the only true flatterer."

It never seemed to dawn on the speaker's intelligence that Alec Gordon had no wish to flatter her.

"I know why you are so stupid to-night," she continued, with a sigh. "I have offended you."

"How?"

"Oh! don't pretend not to know! It was the word 'platonic.' You did not like my putting our friendship under that category."

"On the contrary, Barbara, it is the only category it can come under, and I dare say you find me intolerably dull, because men in love generally are."

"In love!" cried the girl's voice, "you in love!"

"Yes."

"Who with?" she asked sharply.

"You will know some day, but at present she must be nameless. I care for her more than all the world. Won't you wish me luck?"

There was a pause.

"I suppose you have not asked her yet?"

"Well, and what then?"

"She may not like you—in fact I know she will not like you, unless you are more amusing to her than you have been to me to-night. Poor Alec! Has the fever taken you very badly? People tell me it is a malady which is always cured by a dose of matrimony."

She rose, and Myra held her breath at the rustling of the satin skirt. "Don't forget to invite your platonic friend to the ceremony," said Barbara, with a mocking laugh, "and make Mrs. Gordon give a dance for your return. I can't exist without dancing after to-night."

Myra's cheeks were burning, for she had longed to move, but dare not, knowing her partner might return at any moment. She had listened against her will, and was thankful to see the fair-haired youth elbowing through the crowd.

"I had a tremendous hunt for the fan," he said, holding it aloft. "You left it in quite a different place. However, I ferreted it out at last, and here it is, none the worse for having been sat upon by a dowager weighing sixteen stone."

Myra took it from him with a grateful smile.

"It was so good of you," she said.

They went back to the ballroom together, and Alec was waiting for her in the doorway.

"Now, my darling," he whispered. "I can devote myself to you for the rest of the evening. I have toiled through my duty dance with Barbara!"

"And been catechised accordingly," she answered, explaining her unintentional eavesdropping.

They wandered away together into the palmhouse, and the remaining hours were spent in Elysium.

"Well, what did you think of Lady Hayter's ball?" asked Mrs. Gordon, as the carriage whirled them away.

"It was quite the nicest of all my experiences," replied Myra, leaning back on the cushions with a sigh of content.

CHAPTER VII.

Le Jeu Vaut-il donc la Chandelle?

A perfect tribe of cousins descended on the Gordon's one wet Saturday afternoon. They had come to boat, but the elements made any outdoor pastime impossible.

"Here we are, and you've got to amuse us," declared the youngest girl, Penelope's contemporary.

"What shall we do?"

They had gathered round the window in a group.

"Play billiards," suggested one.

"No. Ellaline always cuts the cloth, and the boys play too well to make a game."

"Can't *you* think of something, Miss Granville? Sing us a song."

"I don't sing."

"Then play."

"I—I haven't brought my music," blushing violently.

"Can nobody do anything?" sighed Penelope, contemplating the dismal sky. "Ah! here is the afternoon post, and a letter for you, Miss Granville."

Myra glanced at the writing hurriedly, and hid it away in her pocket.

"Do read your letter," continued Penelope. "There may be something amusing in it, or something dreadful, you never know, or it might need answering directly."

Myra drew out the common envelope reluctantly, with its dog's-eared corners, and sprawling uneducated hand.

The others were talking, and did not observe the sudden change in her face, as she scanned her father's epistle.

For a moment Myra sat dazed and stupefied, then turned in her hour of need to Alec, but he was talking, and she could not attract his attention.

"What shall I do?" she asked herself. "Goodness gracious! what shall I do?"

A sudden inspiration came to her. She glanced at the clock, and saw there was yet time.

"You asked me to suggest something amusing," she began with forced cheerfulness. "Now, I have a brilliant idea! Let us act a charade in the Theatre Royal back drawing-room."

"Oh! I say, Miss Granville, draw it mild," said Alec languidly, barely suppressing a yawn. "Why propose anything so terrible?"

"Don't be lazy," she replied, "or we shall put you in the audience."

"What a horrible threat!"

"Perhaps you did not know amateur acting was my forte? I simply adore it."

"I certainly never heard you mention the fact before."

While he was speaking Myra succeeded in edging to his side.

"Back me up," she whispered, slipping the letter into his hand, "or we are lost!"

He glanced at it swiftly.

"How can you save yourself?" he asked, under cover of conversation.

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"By the charade," she replied, "only help me."

In a moment Alec took the cue from her.

"It really would be *rather* fun," he said. "Come along, girls, and let us think of a word. What would you suggest, Miss Granville?"

"Domestic. I will take the *rôle* of a comic servant, and get Sladen to lend me a cap and gown. It will be quite a becoming get-up. I always admire her aprons."

They rushed off to prepare, Myra discussing the dialogue as she attired herself in Sladen's clothes.

Just as the scene was set, and Penelope dressed as a cook, appeared with the dough for the first syllable, Myra declared she had turned suddenly faint.

"Please don't say anything about it," she whispered confidentially to Ellaline, the eldest cousin. "I shall be all right in a minute. I often feel like this. If you will go on with the charade I'll wait by that open window in the hall."

Ellaline, accustomed to dizziness herself, supported Myra to a chair, and undertook the stage management in her place.

Alec's wife, having counselled him to keep the charade going as long as possible, directly the hall was empty, slipped out of the house, and ran hastily down the drive. Once or twice she glanced fearfully behind her, then hurried on under the protecting shade of the trees.

At last she reached a gate leading to the road. A sigh of relief escaped her, though her heart was still troubled and sore afraid. What if it all ended in failure—total, abject, miserable?

What if the harvest of her scheming were one of ashes and despair?

Presently a well-known figure appeared in the distance, tramping stolidly through the mud. In a moment all sign of agitation left Myra. Acting in real life had become her second nature.

As Joseph Grey approached he caught sight of the slender figure in its spotless apron and black skirt. His daughter's eyes were brimful of welcome.

"Father!" she exclaimed, flinging her arms round his neck, "father!"

There was something hysterical in the cry.

"I couldn't 'elp coming, my girl," he said, "just to see 'ow you was gettin' along, as I was on some farmin' business near here. Marian thought I ought to come straight back, as you'd only been gone a few days; but there, I didn't know I should have missed you so much. Well, now, and it's a fine old place you're at," looking up the avenue. "Are you happy, lass?"

"Oh! yes, father, *so* happy!" with a radiant smile.

"I nearly didn't tell you to expect me, but Marian said surprises was bad for young girls, and sort of unsettled 'em."

"I am thankful you let me know," declared Myra, truly grateful to Aunt Marian. "It would have been as much as my place was worth if you had come up to the house. As it is I slipped out without anyone being the wiser. Mrs. Gordon is so particular, she won't allow us to see a creature. I am sorry I can't ask you in to tea, but I dare not, father!"

There was such a ring of real terror in her voice that Joseph Grey started.

"I say, Myra, they ain't unkind to you?"

"No, no; I could not be more comfortable, but I must respect the rules and regulations of the establishment. Here is a little something I don't want out of my savings, father. Go and get a thorough good meal at the 'Red Lion,' and it will cover your ticket, too."

As she spoke she slipped some gold coins into his hand.

Her father looked at them bewildered.

"I can't take it, lass," he said; "I can't really. It would be robbery!"

"To please me," she intreated, kissing him again, and trembling at the sound of footsteps. "I hear the gardener coming, and if he sees me with a strange man my character will be gone! Good-bye," refusing the money he tried to force back on her. "Take care of yourself, dear, and give my love to Aunt Marian."

With these parting words she flitted away, leaving him standing alone, staring after her, in the road.

Oh! what terrible shame and exposure she had escaped. Her heart stopped beating at the very thought.

As she regained the house Alec opened the door, meeting her with an anxious inquiry.

"I say, Myra, they ain't unkind to you?"

"I have saved you; I have saved myself," she said exultantly.

He drew a long, deep breath.

"Have you seen your father?"

"Yes, and this get-up was a perfect blind," she said, pointing to her cap and apron. "Oh! Alec, what a near shave we have had."

The soft summer rain ceased, and a stray sunbeam fell from the grey sky.

The others, having finished the charade, came out to breathe the damp-scented air.

"It was too cruel of you to desert us and sheer off at the crucial point, Miss Granville," said one of the boys.

"I am so sorry, but I did not feel well, and was obliged to go out."

"Are you better?" asked Ellaline.

"Oh, yes, thank you. How did the charade go?"

"Splendidly, and Mr. Shields was perfectly delighted. He said he hadn't laughed so much for a year, only he wanted to go and look for you in the middle. However, we persuaded him not."

"A thousand thanks! I really think if Mr. Shields had followed me I should have fainted right away."

When Alec and Myra were again alone she gave him a dramatic description of her trying situation.

"I nearly died," she said, "when I read his letter, and knew he would be asking for me at the back door in less than half an hour. I realised at last on what a precipice we are tottering. Think of the hourly dangers, and the certain mortification in store for us. Because for the moment our position is safe and unsullied we lose all fear of that crushing humiliation."

They were far away from Saxbury Cross in the distant woods, so like those of Ligeia Abbey that Myra yearned for their safety and protection.

She came close to her husband and put her arms round his neck.

"My darling," he murmured; "I know how you must suffer. I regret for your sake sometimes that I ever came into your life."

"No, no, Alec," she gasped. "See how you have raised me; remember our love, and never, never let me hear you say such things again."

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There was silence for a moment.

"Keep our secret a little longer," Alec pleaded—"just a little longer, till we feel quite sure of Uncle Julian. Then we will reveal our true position and face the whole world. Can you not endure this for me—my wife?"

He whispered the words very tenderly.

"I don't think you understand how terrible it is," she replied. "I came here on approbation, with the distinct promise that you would tell your mother the real state of the case directly I had won her friendship and regard. I have tried my best, and to-day was a climax. I can't help loving my father, for he has always been good to me. Can you not imagine the pain of meeting him with a tissue of lies on my lips? Besides, every hour I am here is a risk. Any day your mother may write and mention my name to Mrs. Lysaght."

"They never correspond," said Alec. "Mrs. Lysaght's fingers are paralysed, and she doesn't care for letters. I don't suppose my mother writes to her once in a year."

For a moment Myra felt almost angry with her husband.

"But the 'once' might come to-morrow, to-night—this minute," she cried, working herself into a fever of apprehension. "I am like a French criminal who knows not the moment of execution. Sometimes I lock my door, shut my ears, and bury my face in the pillows, to repress the awful forebodings that possess me. Then a kind of stupefaction, a mental inactivity seizes me, and the weight of something heavy seems to dull my faculties. Every spring of action relaxes, and my feelings are deadened for the time. I take little interest in anything, and yet I am not at ease. I am never at peace! The conviction of my own wrong-doing presses heavier after each fresh struggle. I parry questions at every turn, all my principles are slipping away. I am becoming demoralised by this life of shame. Because I school myself to appear happy, you fancy my conscience is dead. But I have not such an elastic will as you imagine."

Her tone was so expressive of a soul overflowing with repentance, and chaffing against gross deceit, that Alec's remorse burst forth in a flow of self-condemnation.

"I am chiefly to blame," she said, breaking in, eager to defend him and convict herself. "I know how difficult it is for you—it is difficult for us both. When first I came to Saxbury Cross I threw a false short-lived lustre over my surroundings. I tried to forget that artifice, plotting, and hypocrisy are crimes, for which some day I shall be punished, as I deserve."

"God forbid!" ejaculated Alec. "There is nothing in your nature but what is pure and good. You have a perfect right to mould your life as you please."

"Yes, and that is why I want to confess, instead of hiding the truth. If it is not wrong, it must be right. The present is dangerous, Alec. Madman's play. We are like foolish children, wandering blindly through a mist—dreamers, castle-builders! I never could believe that 'all things come to him who waits.' It is an idle saying. Evil may come, I grant you, but little else in our case. I want to lead a noble life, and the present is ignoble!"

There were tears in Myra's voice. She was devoured by a secret restlessness, and all her nature's energies were rising in revolt. Her imagination was stirred by prospects of the uncertain and boundless future, the hope of a vast and undefined good, to sweep out this chapter of sin. She longed to form her being to something pure, beautiful, divine! To establish an empire over herself.

Alec could not speak for a moment; a lump in his throat seemed choking him. Then he pulled himself together and made a resolution.

"I will tell my mother—I will tell Uncle Julian," he said, "at the end of the week. There is small chance of discovery in so short a time. I want my mother to know you a little longer, since she never relies on first impressions, and dislikes forming hurried opinions. Are you willing to wait till then?"

"Who can tell what a day may bring forth?" she mused reluctantly.

"Darling," he whispered, "for my sake."

"When you say that, I can refuse you nothing," she declared, melting like wax beneath a flame under Alec's passionate gaze.

"Then let it be," said her husband gently.

Myra laid her hand in his.

"Till the end of the week," she replied.

CHAPTER VIII.

Who hath not Lost a Friend?

Julian Shields was seated in a low garden chair, with Satan at his feet, and a book he was not reading on his knees.

Every now and again he glanced anxiously towards the house, as though expecting someone.

Presently Myra crossed the lawn, and as she approached he drew another chair to his side.

"This is for you," he said, arranging the cushions. "I have been waiting so impatiently ever since you promised to come."

"But you knew I would keep my word?"

"Yes," speaking seriously. "I knew."

A slight misgiving crept into Myra's heart. Something in his tone filled her with secret vexation. Surely he would not overstep the paternal ground on which their friendship was based? Then she remembered his hurried kiss and evident confusion. His presence became suddenly irksome to her.

"What a splendid colour you have!" he said, looking at her blooming cheeks through his glasses.

"It is the country air," she replied, endeavouring not to appear self-conscious.

"Do you like it better than the unwholesome atmosphere of London?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I have such a lovely country home, Miss Granville—a perfect paradise, but lonely—very lonely for one old man."

"Why did you never marry?" asked Myra, eager to gain his confidence.

Julian Shields bent down, and stroked his dog's head.

"Because the right woman wouldn't have me," he replied. "There was only one, and she died years ago."

"Tell me about her," said the girl.

"I never thoroughly understood her nature," declared Julian Shields, "until her death. I think I grasped it then. I believe I know it now. When I first saw her she seemed barely more than a child. A little fair-haired creature, brimming over with high spirits. I can picture her to this day in a simple dress of white muslin, with light curls clustering on her forehead. I was nearly forty at the time, and it amazed me to find untold depths beneath her apparent frivolity. From the first moment we met, she singled me out to be the recipient of her deepest thoughts and feelings, her confidant and counsellor. She kept my letters and re-read

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them frequently, cherished my flowers, sought my companionship, sorrowed at my absence.

"What conclusion could I draw from this, but that she cared for me? and I was right. She loved, but not with the love common to women. When I asked her to be my wife, she raised her eyes unflinchingly to mine, and said: "No," deliberately, relentlessly! I had become so entirely one with her, that I could not imagine the future alone. Separation was impossible, she had grown to be part of my being.

"I sat stunned while she repeated the cruel words of refusal, with her cool hand resting in mine. Then reading the terrible sorrow in my face, the flood gates of regret opened suddenly. She buried her face in her hands and wept, for she knew what she had done. Yet next to her own kith and kin, I was nearer to her than anyone on earth."

"Then why," broke in Myra, "did she treat you so?"

"That is the mystery," he replied, "which years of mutual intercourse gradually unveiled. She loved no other, but she loved me as a friend, and in the bonds of friendship only were our hearts united. That union of souls never broke or tottered. By degrees the soothing influence of her theory healed my sorrow, and cured the wound."

"Then you never tried to forget her?"

"No. Why should I? She was my life—my very self. Without me her days would have been as meaningless and empty as mine without her. Our mutual sympathy, judgment, and companionship were necessary to our separate existences. You cannot have known a friend, or you would not speak of forgetfulness. In connection with friendship there is no such word. It is something less than passion, and greater than love; but" (a little impatiently) "I see you do not understand."

Myra gazed across the river with half-closed eyes.

"Yes," she said at last, "I see it; but it takes time to learn—time to know."

"And then," he faltered, "she died—died with my name on her lips. 'You have been the salvation of my life,' she said to me. 'God bless you as only good and loyal hearts are blessed.'"

"She must have differed widely from all the rest," declared Myra, stretching out her arms, as though to embrace the whole race of women. "On the surface she was wilful—selfish—a flirt; but deep waters ran strong and clear below."

"She was an angel!" cried Julian Shields. "But," with a critical glance at Myra, "you speak as if you had known and studied her."

"I saw her through your eyes," she replied.

He bent forward and captured Miss Granville's hand.

"You are the only living creature who has ever won a confidence from me. It would have been sacrilege to speak of her to another."

His voice trembled with emotion, and a tear fell upon Myra's fingers.

"Do you know why I told you?" he asked eagerly. "Many a year has passed since she left me; why did I speak of her to-day?"

"How can I tell?" said Myra, drawing away her hand. "Perhaps you guessed that I have a keen insight into character?"

"No; not that. I thought I ought to. I know I am an old man—grey, wrinkled, wasted——"

Myra could not contradict him, as she looked at the limp, sunken figure in the chair.

"Yet if," he continued, "one so young and beautiful could deign to look at me without aversion, there is a loving heart and a stately home waiting for you. Myra!—Myra! you won't spurn them?—you won't spurn them?"

His voice rose to a wail.

She looked up sadly. The last shred of her past individuality seemed to fall with the scattered daisy petals she was destroying with nervous fingers.

"Be loyal to the dead," she said firmly, clearly. "Live for memory's sake; is it not enough? You loved her then—love her still!"

"How cold and comfortless," he retorted, "to live for what has no being, and is hidden in the ground. Could you not care a little, Myra? I would give you anything—everything!"

"I can't! I can't! Don't speak of it again," she cried.

Myra's whole nature rose in revolt; how could he think she would sell herself to him?

When next he spoke, her resentment vanished.

"Forgive me, my dear," he muttered feebly, "and forget that I ever dreamt of such a thing. I was presumptuous, mad!"

"Oh! no, please do not imagine I am angry," she replied. "You have paid me the highest possible compliment, and I thank you."

Myra spoke simply, but sincerely.

"How very good you are," he said gratefully. "But may I ask one question? Do you love another?"

Myra's face flushed and paled in turn.

"Would you blame me if I did?"

"No, indeed. Why should I? It is only natural!"

"You confided in me," she whispered. "May I confide in you?"

He drew his chair closer.

"As you please," he answered. "I am your humble servant for life!"

"You won't betray my secret?" Myra's voice shook, and she framed the words with difficulty. "But I love your nephew, Alec."

He started involuntarily.

"If you cannot care for me," said Julian Shields, concealing his emotion, "there is no one I would rather see you marry. Does Alec know his good fortune?"

Before she could answer, their conversation was interrupted by Mrs. Gordon, who joined them with Alec and Penelope.

"I am sure Miss Granville would like to go on the river," said the old man, with a benevolent glance at his nephew. "Take her, Alec, my boy. I am too gouty and decrepid for your light boats."

Myra gave him a grateful look while Alec helped her into the canoe.

Julian waved his handkerchief as they paddled away, watching them lingeringly. Then he turned to Mrs. Gordon.

"We must give the young people a chance, Alethea," he said, with assumed levity. "A charming girl, Miss Granville, and the very wife for Alec."

CHAPTER IX.

Treading the Wine-Press.

"What are you reading, my dear?" asked Mrs. Gordon, finding Myra deep in a book.

"A most interesting history," she replied with glowing cheeks, "of a man self-taught, self-informed. He was born in narrow circumstances, and rose, of course, or his life, with its struggles, sorrows, and retrenchments would never have been written."

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Mrs. Gordon glanced at the title.

"Ah, yes," she replied; "it is one of Alec's. He made me read it when I was ill. He always gives me the very driest books to digest in bed."

"How cruel! But did you find this dry?"

"Unwholesome rather than actually dull—so many distasteful subjects are discussed. For instance, that chapter on the prejudices of caste and rank."

"Showing that a man may be worth more than his wardrobe or title. I have an intense admiration for anyone who can rise from a low estate."

"The hero was a perfect barbarian in early life," said Mrs. Gordon.

"That is the delightful part of the book, for, though he sought to be great, it was not the glare of outward distinction that attracted him."

"You read a great deal?"

"Yes."

"Ah, how you would delight in Mrs. Lysaght's secluded library at Ligeia Abbey! I dare say you have often heard her speak of it, though she would not allow you a glimpse inside if you stayed there for a month. She believes her husband's spirit haunts the room. Once she told me that her maid distinctly heard footsteps when to her certain knowledge no one was within, since the door was locked and she had the key. The foolish woman was too frightened to look, and ran away with her apron over her head."

Myra broke into a peal of laughter.

"Was it in the morning?" she asked.

"Yes. You are evidently not superstitious."

"No. Isn't it funny that anybody should credit such nonsense?"

"I suppose," continued Mrs. Gordon, "you have never seen the Ligeia library?"

"Oh! yes, indeed I have."

"Really? You were singularly favoured, for Mrs. Lysaght is a perfect dog-in-the-manger over that room."

"It is a crime," declared Myra, "that no one should benefit by it. I am never quite sure about the tenth commandment when I think of those books. Mrs. Lysaght should write a warning text over the door: 'Take heed, and beware of covetousness!' I dreamt I saw it thrown open to the Eversley public, with the words: 'Soul, take thine ease!' inscribed above the shelves."

Mrs. Gordon took up her embroidery, and Myra watched her needle fly in and out with a certain fascination.

"I wonder," continued the girl, "if this present age is worse than the past? Does the world deteriorate, or improve?"

Mrs. Gordon stopped working to look at Myra.

"You are always thinking out something!" she said. "It is a way I have noticed young people fall into when they associate greatly with their elders. You are, I presume, frequently with your father—in fact, his chief companion."

"I have no mother, you see."

"Is he a very learned man—a bookworm? I often fancy he has brought you up to take a serious view of life, which makes you seem older than your years."

"Oh! no, you are quite mistaken. I began to 'think' when I was very young. I ought to have been a man. I should never have rested till I did something great for my country, but being a woman," with a sigh, "I am useless."

"Not at all. Influence is always helpful, if you exercise it rightly. I quite enjoy a talk with you, my dear, you are so unlike other girls. Does your father do anything in the way of business, or is he always with you?"

"He is always with me," said Myra. "He is old, and enjoys an inactive country life."

"Does he take much interest in politics?"

"No."

"I suppose you go about a great deal, and visit frequently?"

"I don't often leave him."

"Probably you have a great many friends at Eversley?"

"Yes, but it is a very quiet place."

"I don't know anyone there," said Mrs. Gordon, "except Mrs. Lysaght. By the way, I hear she has recovered her strength, moving about quite easily now. She tried some wonderful natural water from America, called Geneva water, which worked miracles, at least so I was informed by a mutual friend."

"She has been travelling abroad," said Myra.

"Really! I hardly ever see or hear from her now, except when Alec went to stay at Ligeia Abbey. She was very kind to him, and he quite enjoyed his visit. But I am disturbing you in your book."

"I have nearly finished it."

"And you agree with the sentiments?"

"Entirely."

"I grew weary of the endless comments on our imperfections. Undoubtedly eating, drinking, and "caste" are not to be despised, being essential. But to pretend that common people can rise socially to our level, and be received in our drawing-rooms, is absurd! They would jar dreadfully."

"Have you ever seen it attempted?"

"Never!"

"Then how can you tell? If the lowest were received from their youth by the upper classes, there might be no vulgar ill-bred men and women in the world."

Mrs. Gordon laughed outright.

"What a very funny idea!" she said.

"Everybody is so narrow," declared Myra, warming to her subject. "Society is a battlefield, where the spirit of discord breaks out in religion, politics, business and private life. Each man is seeking to snatch some prey from his neighbour, and to cast his brother in the sea. If we scrutinise it we find nothing but petty strife and hopeless sin. Some people can't help themselves, they are made to sin against their will by the force of circumstances, but the majority sin for the pure pleasure of it. Clever men and women write books to rob us of our God; weak men and women read them, and lose their faith."

"My dear girl," cried Mrs. Gordon, "you cannot possibly comprehend the universe! You can only reconcile yourself to facts, and think no more about them."

"I should be so happy if I could."

"I suppose we are all born under a curse," sighed Mrs. Gordon, "and the devil will be ever rampant in the world."

"If there was only one devil, it wouldn't matter so much," said Myra, smiling, "but there must be so many demons to do the harm. I sometimes wonder if there is any difference between a devil and a demon?"

"I expect they are pretty much the same."

"Perhaps a demon is a lower devil—a humanised devil—the sort that takes possession of men when they drive their higher selves out, when they throw aside control!"

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Myra was silent for a moment, then she returned to the old subject.

"If I were a village girl with low born parents, would you consider me fit to be your guest?" she asked.

Mrs. Gordon looked into Myra's anxious eyes, and smiled indulgently.

"My dear, your hypothesis is impossible. Were it possible, I certainly should!" touching her hand caressingly. "I am very glad Alec met you at Eversley, and hope we shall see a great deal of each other."

"I should, indeed, love to have you for my friend—always," said Myra.

"You must prove your friendship by coming here frequently," declared Mrs. Gordon. "I shall be delighted to welcome you at any time."

As Myra talked to Mrs. Gordon, she resolved not to lie down again and take her rest until the secret burden had been lifted from her soul. She determined, though the week was not yet out, to force Alec to speak, or on some pretext to leave the house. Even mentioning Mrs. Lysaght to Mrs. Gordon had caused Myra pain, as she thought of the patroness on whose grounds she had lived, and in whose service her father was employed.

She contemplated her position with abhorrence. Had not she, Myra, pretended to this woman's friendship (which she did not really possess) as a garment of respectability, a weapon with which to break into Mrs. Gordon's family circle?

Myra leant against a low bough.

Every word she had spoken at Saxbury Cross, everything she had ever done, what did it amount to? Deceit and guilt!

Her own sense of judgment swelled the evidence against her.

Oh! the pity of it—the pity of it!

She cursed the fate that gave her humble parentage. What had she done after all to suffer the scorn of Mrs. Lysaght and her friends? Where lay her sin? The crime of being poor and lowly, and trying an unbeaten track, the unpardonable offence of flying in the face of conventionality, which must ever be held sacred. With a little gasp Myra rose and left the room.

"Does the road wind up hill all the way?" she asked pitifully, raising her face to Heaven as she went out into the fresh air.

"Yes, all the way. Resolution and perseverance may crumble the hard stones to dust, but unless the traveller climbs, he will grovel for ever below in the vale of mortality."

A terrible condemnation seemed to have fallen upon her shoulders.

"If you had stayed in your proper province," said conscience, "you would have escaped the grievous mortification of the coming confession, and been saved the wear and tear of aping good breeding, struggling with topics of discourse, courting contempt, falling into errors."

The follies of vanity, the delusions of self-conceit, the restlessness of ambition, and the torments of envy, crowded into her mind, but were hounded out and crushed by the undying power of love. None of these things had any right to taunt her. She married for love, lived for love, and would, if need be, suffer for its sake. Love, the over-ruling passion of her life, had led her into the trap blindly. Love had been to blame all along.

There was no making a choice between good and evil; she had been moved by impulse, driven by the torrent of an all-prevailing affection. That was her defence before all her enemies!

It was absurd to imagine she could strive against it. What woman was ever strong yet? No opposition, contention, or persuasion would have parted her from Alec.

Presently she found her husband, and confronted him with a startling assertion.

"The end is at hand," she said lightly.

"What do you mean?"

She smiled into his eyes, and her face looked radiant in the sunlight.

"You are going to free me to-day," she replied, a ring of calm determination in her tone. "I have tired and sickened of this play—this farce. It is not my nature, dear; I cannot keep it up. The deception shall not last an hour longer, if I can help it. Release me from bondage, or let me go away and hide myself from everybody. I have been talking to your mother, and I believe she likes me. I feel nerved for the fray. There must be a thunderstorm to clear the air."

Myra leant against a low bough, and picked off the bark, waiting for Alec to speak. As always exquisitely alive to outward creation, sounds, motions, and forms, she feasted her eyes on the natural beauty of the quiet river scene with a sigh of content.

"I am so glad I have decided," she said—"so thankful to have made up my mind."

For the first time Alec realised that his wife's will was stronger than his own, and he loved her all the better.

"You really wish it," he said, "this very day—this very hour?"

She bent her head in assent.

Alec gazed at Myra as on a superior being whom he was not worthy to touch. His own interests, plans, and advancement were all swallowed up in an entire and unreserved devotion to her.

A certain sense of triumph and exultation possessed him as he obeyed the first command she had ever made.

"Where is my mother?" he asked.

She pointed to the drawing-room windows. Myra's presence had thrown into circulation new and stirring thoughts as Alec took her hand and walked towards the house, feeling roused and fortified to well-doing. He could withstand trial, bear suffering, front danger, and resist scorn with this loving woman at his side.

She had imparted to him her deep, pure, ennobling instincts, and he would acknowledge her as his wife before the sun set.

CHAPTER X.

Le Jeu est Fait.

As Myra mounted the staircase leading from the garden to the balcony, touching the banisters lightly with trembling fingers, she dared not reveal her agitation.

Perhaps she was seeking Mrs. Gordon for the last

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time, and would vanish from Saxbury Cross like a shadow in the night, only to be remembered as an evil interloper who darkened its doors for a season.

Alec's mother was talking to someone as they entered—a visitor who turned and faced Myra with an astonished stare.

The girl neither started nor spoke, but stood petrified, her blood frozen in her veins, her throat parched and dry, and her eyes dimmed by a sudden mist.

"Mrs. Lysaght has just returned from abroad, and came to surprise me," said Mrs. Gordon pleasantly. "I need not introduce you."

The old lady put on her glasses and confronted Myra.

"What are you doing here?" she asked freezingly, "and in those clothes?"

The sound of her voice seemed to impart fresh powers of self-possession to the girl, who would formerly have quailed under Mrs. Lysaght's gaze.

"Is anything wrong with them?" she said, glancing down at her dress. Then with a friendly smile: "How do you do, Mrs. Lysaght; how are you?"

No answer.

Mrs. Lysaght drew away as though she had been stung.

"Miss Granville has been staying with us," vouchsafed Alec's mother, surprised at this new departure.

"*Staying with you!*" cried Mrs. Lysaght vehemently. "My dear Alethea are you mad?"

For a moment Mrs. Gordon doubted her senses, staring at her visitors with troubled eyes.

"Myra *Grey*," continued Mrs. Lysaght, emphasising the last word, "explain yourself. What terrible deception have you been practising? Can you deny that your name is Grey?"

"Yes," she replied, and her eyes dilated. "I do deny it. When you say I bear that name you speak falsely."

"In fact, I lie?" sneered the old lady.

"You are under a misapprehension," said Myra quietly.

Mrs. Lysaght quivered with indignation, and her face grew purple as she struggled to regain composure.

"Then who is this woman, Alec?" she burst out furiously, "if she is not one of my retainers, the daughter of the man at my lodge-gates, masquerading as a lady? I suppose that is how you amused yourself at Ligeia Abbey?"

"Mrs. Lysaght," he replied, "you are insulting my mother's guest. Mother, has there been anything in this lady's conduct to justify such remarks?"

"No," stammered Mrs. Gordon. "There must be some terrible mistake."

"Tut! tut! Don't I know my own servants?"

Alec's face grew dark and forbidding.

"She is neither your servant nor Myra Grey," he cried, livid with pent up fury. "She is Myra Gordon, and my wife!"

Mrs. Lysaght sank with a moan on her chair, while Mrs. Gordon stood motionless, like a woman turned to stone.

"It is true, then," she said at last, breaking that awful pause. "This girl is indeed what Mrs. Lysaght says, and you, Alec—you have *married* her?"

The bitter ring in the mother's voice pierced Myra's heart.

Involuntarily she started forward, her beautiful face drawn and haggard with sudden pain.

"Spare me!" she cried, "for pity's sake! I love him so."

"Love him!" broke in Mrs. Lysaght, "a scheming minx! You love his money and position, and to think this terrible calamity should have been perpetrated beneath my roof."

"Will you hear me; will you let me speak?" cried Myra.

"You have no need to," declared Alec, gently taking her hand. "I can speak if anything has to be said. My wife shall explain nothing."

His wife—his wife before all the world! Oh! how her heart swelled with pride at the words.

He advanced towards his mother and tried to kiss her, but she drew away.

"Why have you deceived me?" she asked sternly.

"I will tell you. I wanted you to be perfectly unprejudiced, and meet Myra before malicious tongues

The old lady put on her glasses and confronted Myra.

could bias you against her. In becoming my wife she has made me the happiest and proudest man in England."

"And so he ought to be—so he ought to be!" cried a cackling voice in the balcony, while to the astonishment of everybody Julian Shields appeared, with his face wreathed in smiles. He gazed benignly upon the young couple, stretching out a hand to each.

"I have a confession to make," he said, "and you must not be shocked. I have been eaves-dropping."

A gasp of relief escaped Myra. She feared he had not heard all. Her hand tightened over his, and she edged nearer as a frightened child, with piteous, pleading eyes.

Julian Shields gave her a reassuring glance, and turned to Mrs. Lysaght. In a moment his face altered, he frowned ominously, while his voice quavered with suppressed indignation.

"I don't know who you are," he said, addressing the

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"Take the serpent out of our Eden!" he said, pointing to the portly figure in the chair.

new-comer, "and I don't wish to. But if I were to say what I think of you, it is doubtful, very doubtful, whether Saxbury Cross would ever see your face again."

Then he turned to Alethea.

"Take the serpent out of our Eden!" he said, pointing to the portly figure in the chair.

Mrs. Gordon touched her forehead as a significant sign to Mrs. Lysaght.

The latter raised her eyes sympathetically to the ceiling, and lent back on the cushions.

"As for you, Alethea," he continued, "at your time of life you ought to know better. You can be no sister of mine to treat a lady in this inhospitable and uncivil manner. Your duty as a mother and a hostess should have saved you from such a shameful breach of etiquette. I am sorry for you, very sorry, Alethea. Your lack of good breeding will not be forgotten. Your dear boy has no father to protect him against the snobbery of his female relations, but I am ready to take the place of that lost parent, if he and his wife will accept me as such."

Myra raised her face for the paternal salute he pressed on her brow.

"I know you have a perfect right to blame me for not confiding in you from the first," Alec said to Mrs. Gordon very gently. "I planned this visit for a purpose. I could not believe that after even a short acquaintance with Myra you would ever think ill of her. I have chosen her from all the world to love and to honour because I know she is the best and purest woman on earth. This very afternoon we decided to tell you, and were coming for that purpose when Mrs. Lysaght intervened."

Myra turned to the visitor when Alec had finished speaking.

"Have you anything to say against me?" she asked, "beyond the accident of birth? Can you mention one slur upon my character—one breath of slander? Do you deny that we are honest people?"

"Certainly not," retorted Mrs. Lysaght; "but you are no fit wife for Alec Gordon—a village girl, with a villager's education!"

Her words nerved Myra to plead still further with Mrs. Gordon.

"Have you forgotten the hypothesis which you called impossible?" she asked, with a deep ring of pathos in her tone. "Won't you recall your words now? Must I be cast out because God placed me in a lowly home and gave me humble parentage? I could not help loving your son—surely the very sight of him here before your eyes justifies that assertion? Then Mrs. Lysaght speaks of my 'village education' as another slight. Have you found me untaught—uncouth? If so, say it, and let me go—let me go!"

She repeated the words wildly, her eyes blazing with feverish light, and her hands outstretched.

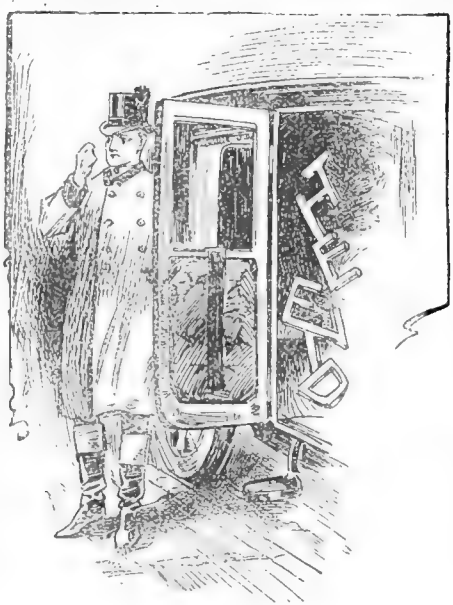
"Pray do not be dramatic, I ask you," said Mrs. Lysaght scathingly.

But Mrs. Gordon's nature had been undergoing a change, while views so fresh and real sprang into her heart that she hardly appeared the same woman.

Myra's influence had enlarged her theories, widened her ideas, and brought scope to a narrow vision. She understood her son's human weakness, and noted the attractive sweetness of his girl-wife. Men love strongly, and she divined in Alec's look the intense suffering produced by her pride and resentment.

Her anger broke down suddenly, while she saw in a clearer light the full force of Myra's love and trust, and the impression her strong, consistent character had made upon her husband.

Mrs. Gordon no longer hardened her heart, but gradually moulded it into the image of divine forbearance and forgiveness. Even Mrs. Lysaght, in her exasperation, could bring no evil report to bear upon Alec's wife, and all the mother's ill-will and suspicion were dispelled.



Her face softened, the hard expression round her mouth relaxed, while her eyes glowed suddenly with pity, love, and pardon.

She walked slowly forward, and kissed Myra upon the lips.

"Do you sanction this disgraceful alliance?" burst forth Mrs. Lysaght fiercely.

Alethea bent her head.

"I do, most certainly," she answered firmly.

A ray of sunlight shone straight through the open window, and fell like a halo upon Myra's hair.

Mrs. Lysaght rose and re-entered her carriage

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LEGENDS OF WOLFVILLE.

BY "DAN QUINN."

Wolfville is a Cattleman's Settlement in Arizona, and the Characters in these Legends are Cowboys.

No. 5.—The Bluff that Moved the Rival Dance Hall.

"WHICH I reckons," remarked the old cattleman, as he tilted his chair against the wall and began arranging a smoke; "which I now reckons this yere was the only catyclism in trade Wolfville suffers, the only time it comes to what you all Eastern sports would call a show-down in commerce.

"O' course, thar's the laundry war I mentions to you aforetime; but that's between females, an' don't count. Females—while it's no sorter doubt they're the noblest work o' their Redeemer — is nervous an' peculiar that away, an' due any time to let their hair down their backs, emit a screech, an' claw an' lay for each other just for luck. An' as I says, if you confines the festivities to the females engaged, an' prevents the men standin' in on the play, it shore winds up in sobs and forgiveness, an' tharfore don't count.

"As I says, what I now relates is the only real industrial trouble I recalls in Wolfville.

"I allers remembers it, because, bein' as how I knows the party who's the aggravatin' cause tharof, it mortifies me the way he jumps into camp and carries on.

"When I sees him first is ages before; when I freights with eight mules over the Old Fort Bascome trail from Vegas to the Panhandle. This sharp—which he's a tenderfoot at the time, but plumb wolf by nature —trails up to me in the Early Rose saloon an' allows he'd like to make a deal an' go projectin' over into the Panhandle country with me for a trip.

"I was campin' then on the Concha, an' the Colonel, who's allers out to try experiments an' new deals, puts it up he'll go down to the river an' take a swim. So he lines out for the water.

"Jerry's hangin' about camp—for he's sorter a pet mule—allowin' mebby I commits a ham-rind or some such delicacy to him to chew on; an' he hears the Colonel allow he'll swim some. So when the Colonel p'ints out for the Concha, Jerry sa'nters along after; figgerin' mighty likely how he'll pass the hour by watchin' the Colonel swim.

"I'm busy on flapjacks at the time—which flapjacks is shore good eatin'—an' I don't observe nuthin' to Jerry nor the Colonel neither.

"They're away half an hour when I overhears ejaculations of rage an' horror, though I can't make out no words. I don't have to get caught in no landslide to tumble to a game, an' I'm aware at once that Jerry an' the Colonel has got their destinies mixed.

"Of course I goes over to the field of strife, aimin' to save Jerry, or save the Colonel, whichever has the other down. When I bursts on the scene, the Colonel starts for me, splutterin' an' makin' noises an' p'ntin' at Jerry, who stands thar with an air of insolence. The Colonel's upper lip hangs down queer, like an ant-eater's, an' he can't talk no more. It's all mighty amazin'.

"'What's all this toomult about?' I says.

"The short of the riot is this: When the Colonel goes in for his swim he lays his false teeth that way on a stone. When he comes for his teeth, they're shorely gone, an' thar stands Jerry puttin' it on he's asleep. Them teeth is filed away in Jerry's stomach.

"Which the Colonel raves 'round frightful an' wants to kill Jerry an' amputate him in two an' look for the teeth. But I won't stand it. I'm going to need Jerry down further on the quicksand fords of the Canadian; an' as I explains, them teeth is a wreck by now, an' no good even if he gets 'em again; Jerry munchin' of his food powerful.

"After a while I rounds up the Colonel an' herds him back to camp. Jerry has shore sawed off a sore affliction on that tenderfoot when he takes in them teeth; I can see that. His lip hangs down like a blacksmith's apron, an' he can't talk a little bit; jest makes signs or motions like he's Injun or deaf.

"It's mebby two weeks later when Jerry gets another shot at the Colonel. It's the evenin' after the night Jerry sneaks into camp, soft foot as a coyote, an' noses open the grub box, an' eats up five bottles of whiskey; all we has.

"We're jest gone into camp, an' I've hobbled this Jerry mule an' his mate the other wheeler, an' is busy hobblin' my nigh swing-mule, when I hears trouble fomentin' between my tenderfoot an' Jerry.

"The fact is she's done fomented. This Colonel, bein' some heated about that whiskey an' plumb sore on Jerry on account of them teeth, allows to himse'f he'll jest nacherally take a trace-chain an' warp Jerry once or twice for luck.

"If this yere tenderfoot had a been free with me an' invited me into his confidence touchin' his designs, I'd took a lariat an' roped an' throwed Jerry for him, an' tied the felon down an' let the Colonel wallop him an hour or so. But the Colonel's full of variety that away, or mebby he thinks I'll side with Jerry; anyhow, he selects a trace-chain an' without sayin' a word dances all cautious towards his prey.

"Which this is relaxation for Jerry. While that Colonel tenderfoot is a rod away, Jerry turns his tail some sudden in that direction, an' then that he'pless shorthorn stops both heels some'ers up about the second button on his shirt.

"That settles it. The Colonel's an invalid immejit. I shorely has a time with him that night.

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"The next day he can't walk; an' he can't ride in the waggon, 'cause of the jolts. It all touches my heart, an' at last I ups an' makes a hammock outen a Navajo blanket, which is good an' strong, an' sorter swings the Colonel to the reach of the trail-waggon.

"Where the trail's level the Colonel comes on all right; but now an' then when a wheel slumps into a rut, the Colonel can't help but smite the ground where he's the lowest, an' it all draws groans an' laments from him a heap.

"One time when his agony makes him groan speshul strong, I sees Jerry toss his head as if he enjoys it, an' mention somethin' in an exultant tone to his mate over the waggon-tongue. Of course, we're trottin' 'long the trail at the time, an' bein' he's the nigh—which is the saddle-mule of a team—I'm riding Jerry's comrade. So when I notes how Jerry is that joyous about it, I reaches across an' belts him some abrupt in between the y'ears with the butt of a shot-filled blacksnake; an' it sorter lets the whey outen Jerry's delight, an' he doesn't get so much bliss outen that tenderfoot's misfortune as he did.

"It goes along all right until I swings down to the crossing of the Canadian. It's about fourth drink-time in the afternoon, an' I'm 'llowing to cross the Canadian that evenin' an' camp on t'other side.

"The river is high an' rapid from rains some'ers back on its headquarters, an' it's wide an' ugly. It ain't more'n four foot deep, but the bottom is quicksand, an' that false. If I let's my waggons stop ten seconds anywhere between bank an' bank, I'm going to be shy the waggons at the close. I'll be dead lucky if I win out with the mules. It was a hard, swift crossin'.

"I swings down to the river's aige with my mind filled up about the rush I've got to make. It's go through on the run or bog down.

"First, I settles down in my saddle, an' then I pours the whip into the two leaders, and starts the whole eight into the water on the jump. The river is running like a scared wolf, an' the little lead mules hardly touches bottom.

"Jest as the trail waggon takes the water, an' as the two leaders is plumb into the y'ears a howl developes behind me. It's my poor tenderfoot in his hammock under the trail waggon. He shrieks as the water catches him, an' it all hits me like a bullet, for I plumb overlooks him, thinkin' of that quicksand crossin'.

"It's shore too late now, I'm in an' I can't stop. To make things more complex, jest as the water cuts off the tenderfoot's yell like puffin' out of a candle, a little black mule, which is my off pointer, loses his feet and goes down. I pours the leather into the team the harder; an' the others go into their collars an' drags my black pointer with them; only he's under water. O' course, I 'llows both the black pointer an' the Colonel's gone for good, an' shorely due to drown'd a whole lot.

"We gets out, the seven other mules an' me with the waggons, an' the second he's staked out on the sand on his side, the drown'd mule gets up an' sings as triumphant as I ever hears. Swimmin' under the river don't bother him a bit.

"Then I looks for the Colonel under the trail waggon, but he's vanished complete. Nacherally, I takes him for a dead an' gone man; an' figgers if some eddy or current don't get him; or he don't go aground on no sand bar, his fellow men will fish him out som'ers between me an' New Orleans, an' hold service over him an' plant him.

"Bein' as I can't be of no use where it's a clean sweep play like this, I dismisses the poor tenderfoot from my mind; an' after hobblin' an' throwin' loose my team, lugs out the grub box an' goes into camp.

"Which I should allers have played that tenderfoot for dead, if it ain't that years later he one day comes wanderin' into Wolfville. He ain't no tenderfoot now; he's as hard as a moss agate, an' about as worthless.

"I renoos my acquaintance with him, an' he onfolds how he gets outen the Canadian that day; but beyond that we takes a drink or two at the same time, I sorter passes him up. Thar's a heap about him I don't take to.

"He lays around Wolfville, mebby it's a week, sorter peerin' an' spyin' about. He says he's lookin' for 'an openin'.' An' I reckon he is, for at the end of a week he slaps up a joint outen tent cloth an' fence boards an' opens a dance hall squar ag'inst the one which is already thar.

"This yere alone is likely to brood an' hatch trouble; but as if takin' a straight header into Hamilton's game ain't enough—this yere Jim Hamilton is the man who has the dance hall in Wolfville previous—this Colonel of mine don't get no pianer; nor round up no music of his own; but stands in an' pulls off reels, an' quadrilles, an' greencorn dances to Hamilton's music goin' on next door.

"I was through the Lincoln county war, an' has pervaded the frontier for years; but I never tracks up on no sech outrage in my life, as this yere disgraceful Colonel openin' a hurdy-gurdy right agin Hamilton's, an' then stealin' his music an' dancin' tharunto.

"It is the second night, an' Hamilton concloodes he'll see about it some. He comes in to the Colonel's new joint all ca'm an' considerate, an' gives it out thar's goin' to be trouble if the Colonel don't close up his game or bring on his own fiddlers.

"'An' if you all don't close your game or hunt out your own music,' said Hamilton, 'I'll mighty shore to get my six-shooter an' close it for you.'

"'See yere,' says my Colonel—which he's sure been learnin' since I parts with him on the Canadian—'the first hold-up who comes foolin' round to break up a baile of mine, I'll bend a gun over his head. What business you got fillin' up my place of business with your melodies? You jest rolls your tunes in yere like you owns the ranch, an' then comes curvin' in an' talks of a gun play because instead of layin' for you for that you disturbs my peace with them harmonies, I'm that good-natured I yields the p'int an' dances to 'em. Now you pull your freight,' says the Colonel, 'or I'll fill you full of lead.'

"This argument of the Colonel dazzles Hamilton to that extent he don't know whether he's got the high hand or no. He thinks a minute an' then p'ints over to the Red Light lookin' for Enright and Doc. Peets. Jest as he leaves the rival dance hall, the Colonel, who's callin' off his dances, turns to the quadrille, which is pausin', pendin' the dispoote, an' shouts:

"'You bet I knows my business. Right hand to your pardner; grand right an' left.'

"When Hamilton turns away they're shorely makin' things rock an' tremble, an' all to the strains of 'The Arkansas Traveller,' which is bein' played next door at Hamilton's expense.

"'Which somethin's goin' to pop,' says Hamilton mighty ugly to Enright, an' the rest of us, as over at the Red Light he pours a drink into his neck. 'I allows in the interests of peace that I canters over an'

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sees you all first. I ain't out to shake up Wolfville, nor give Red Dog a chance to criticise us as a disorderly camp, but I asks you, gents, as citizens and members of the vigilance committee, whether I'm to stand an' let this yere sharp steal my music to hold his revels by, an' put it all over me nightly?'

"'I don't see no difference,' says Dave Tutt, 'between this yere convict a-stealin' of Hamilton's music than if he goes an' stands up Old Monte an' the stage.'

"'The same bein' my idea exact,' says Texas Thompson. 'Yere's Hamilton caterin' to this camp with a dance hall. It's a public good thing. If a gent's moroose an' his whiskey's slow gettin' action he goes over to Hamilton's hurdy-gurdy an' finds relaxation an' relief. Now, yere comes this stranger—an' I makes it 50 dols. even he's from Massachusetts—an' what does he do? Never ante nor sticks in a white chip, but purloins Hamilton's cadencies an' strains, an' pulls off his dances tharby. It's a dead wrong, an' what this party needs is hangin' some.'

"'Oh, I don't know,' says Cherokee Hall, who's in on the talk, 'Hamilton's all right an' a square man. All he wants is justice. Now while I deems the conduct of this yere stranger low an' ornery, still comin' right down to the turn, he's on his trail all right. Jest as he says: "Who gives Hamilton any licence to go fillin' this sharp's hurdy-gurdy full of dance music?" S'pose this gent would come caperin' over an' set in a stack agin Hamilton for over-loadin' his joint with pianer an' fiddle noises without his consent; an' puttin' it up he's out to drag the camp if Hamilton don't cease? The only way Hamilton gets round that kind of complaint is, he don't own them walses an' quadrilles after they fetches loose from his fiddles; an' he's not responsible after they gets stampeded off into space.'

"'That's straight,' says Dan Boggs, 'a gent can't own no music after he cuts it loose, that away. The minute it leaves the bosom of his fiddle, that's where he lets go of it. After that it belongs to the great American public to dance by, cry by, set by, or fight by, as they deems meet an' pleasant at the time.'

"'What do you all say?' says Hamilton to Enright and Peets. 'Does this yere piece of oppression on a leadin' citizen perpetrated by a rank outsider go? I shore waits for your reply with impatience, for I eetches to go back an' shoot up that new hurdy-gurdy from now till sun-up.'

"Enright takes Doc. Peet down by the end of the bar—an' thar's no doubt about it that Peets is the wisest long-horn west of the Missouri—an' they has a slight consultation. We was waiting some interested to see what they says. It's shore a fine p'int this Colonel's makin' to jestify an' back his play.

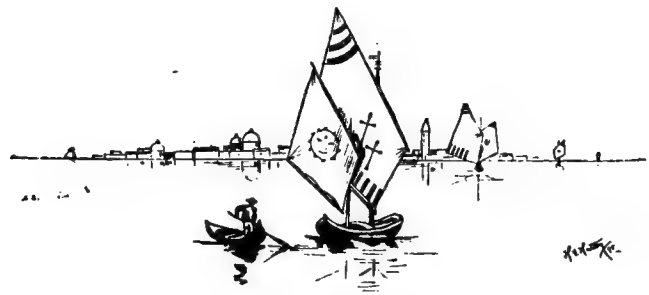
"'Get a move on you, Enright,' at last says Dan Boggs, who is a hasty, eager man, who likes action; 'get a move on, you an' Peets, an' settle this. You're gummin' the kyards an' delayin' the game.'

"'Well, gents,' says Enright, at last comin' back where we was by the door, 'Peets an' me sees no need of decidin' on them questions about who owns a tune after said tune has been played. But that is a question which requires consideration, an' which most likely solves this dance hall deadlock. In all trade matters in a growin' camp like Wolfville it's better to preserve a equilibrium. It's agin public interest to have two or three dance halls, or two or three saloons all in a bunch that away. It's better they be spattered around wide apart, which is more convenient. So Peets an' me proposes as a roole for this camp that two hurdy-gurdies be forbid to be carried on within say five hundred feet of each other. As it looks like nobody objects we concloods it's adopted. Nacherally, the last hurdy-gurdy up has to move, which disposes of this yere trouble.

"'Before I ends what I has to say,' goes on Enright, 'I wants to thank our townsman, Mr. Hamilton, for consultin' of the stranger prior to a killin'. It shows he's a law-abidin' man an' a credit to a camp; as well as mighty likely prolongs his stay on earth. If he'd pranced in an' skelped this maraudin' stranger, as I sees the deal, I don't reckon we could avoid swingin' him at the loop end of a lariat without makin' a dangerous precedent. As it is, his rival will be routed an' his life made serene as heretofore.

"'As to the execution of this new roole,' concloodes Enright, 'we leaves that to Jack Moore. He will wait on this party, an' explain the game. He must up stakes an' move his camp at least five hundred feet. If he calls on another shindig after he's warned, we takes our ponies an' our ropes an' yanks his outfit up by the roots. A gent of his enterprise, however, will come to a dead halt; an' his persecutions of Hamilton will cease.'

"'An' you all calls this yere a free camp?' says my Colonel mighty scornful when Jack Moore notifies him. 'If I don't line out for t'other end of camp you all will rope my joint an' pull it down. Well, that settles it; I jest quits you; I'd be shorely ashamed to put in my time with any such low-flung passel of sports. You may go back an' tell your folks that as you leaves you hears me give the call to my guests, "all promenade to the bar"; an' the dancin' is done. To-morry I departs for Red Dog to begin life anew. Wolfville is too slow a camp for any gent with any swiftness in him!'"



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THE LAST REVEL.

I HURRIED along the road from town, for it was already late. Time had flown faster than I thought, and night had come on intensely dark by the time I reached the gate. The sky was overcast with heavy, lowering clouds, that seemed almost to brush the wavering tree-tops. The air was chill, and the wind blew from the east in unsteady gusts, driving the clouds and mist before it, and making chance wayfarers shiver under their great coats and wraps.

As I passed between the massive stone pillars, the couchant bronze lions seemed to start out of the darkness, and the gates closed heavily behind me. Their iron clang smote on my ear with a sound as of a knell, and a strange fear came over me again. It was gone in an instant, however, and I walked up the avenue that led to the house.

Beyond the trees the house loomed up—grotesque enough in the daytime, but giving in the darkness an impression of mild grandeur. Lights glittering here and there from its front, like elfin fires, where the curtains now and then swayed back from the windows, and seemed to justify the wild tale, as it ran among the townsfolk, that the house was haunted. Haunted it was, and by as restless and terrible a spirit as ever formed the theme of ghostly story; but he was yet of mortal form. As I walked up the broad steps to the doors, they swung open, and the light burst forth in a blinding glare.

"Am I late, Merton?" I asked of the solemn-visaged servant who took my coat as the doors noiselessly closed behind me.

"They're all here, sir," was his non-committal answer.

I entered the long room whence the sound of voices came fast and furious. The wild gorgeousness of the furnishings—the walls covered with rich draperies, the dark-framed paintings (the wildest and most horrible in art) that showed from between the heavy folds as they were drawn back, the chairs and tables, carved of strange woods into grotesque shapes—were mute witnesses to the wanton and eccentric tastes of the owner.

Under the brilliant lights a gay company of roisterers gave the final touch to the scene. Gathered round the tables, feverishly watching the throw of the dice or the turn of a card, their eyes seemed to glow with a brightness of their own, as if to rival the lights themselves. The clink of money, as it was piled up on the table, or swept into the winners' hands, the contagion of example, the confusion of voices, seemed to excite one and all to wilder extravagance. It was an intoxication of gambling.

Over the mad scene the host presided, the wildest of that wild company. He was, indeed, the fit leader of those about him. His name is still spoken with bated breath by those among whom he lived. It is, to them, the impersonation of evil. I dare not record it here, for the events of which I write are too recent; but he will be known to these lines as Charles Gordon, for both these names were his by right of christening.

As I entered he was standing by a table, over which three of his guests were feverishly bending.

"A hundred on the red!" I heard him cry, as he threw a handful of gold on the table. Then, as he caught sight of me, he came quickly forward without another thought of his wager.

"Hail again, Gilmore!" he cried gaily. "You come late. Time flies with us, you know. Five minutes yet before the supper is announced. Make the best or the worst of your time. Throw the golden fuel on the fires of Chance. See how it kindles the blood and gleams in the eye!" And he pushed me towards one of the tables.

There in a moment I was in the full tide of excitement; I felt a strange fascination in watching him to-night. His thick, black hair, which he allowed to grow long, reached in irregular waves below his collar. His dark eyes glistened, and his face, though marked and furrowed prematurely by dissipation, glowed with animation and force as he went from table to table, winning at one, losing at another, and talking boisterously all the time.

I have no doubt of it now. I believe—yes, I know—that he was stark mad. We might have known the dreadful truth if we had paused for a moment in the race he was leading us. But we were mad, too, in the spell that his strong will had cast over us. The reckless waste of his fortune, the grotesque fancy that he showed in the form and furnishing of his house, in his speech, in everything about him; his hare-brained acts, his reckless defiance of all laws, human and divine—one and all pointed to the awful fact that we never so much as suspected.

Suddenly there was a single loud tap on the brazen

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gong that hung above the door. I had heard it time and again, but to-night it gave me a violent start. It struck on my ears as the clanging gates had done before, with a sound as of a knell. I seemed not alone in this feeling, for I observed three or four others start in sudden fear. But Gordon himself felt no check of spirits; and, merrily, boisterously chattering, he led the way into the supper-room.

As we entered, a sudden dread fell upon the few more sensitive, and they halted at the door; for the room was furnished in the deepest black. Heavy draperies hung in sable folds from the walls, and stretched before the windows. Even the ceiling had been tinted to the same sombre hue since we had last been there—but three nights before. The lamps seemed oppressed by the dark draperies, and shed but a dusky light on the table beneath.

"Wh—hy is this?" asked one of those who had halted almost timidly on the threshold.

Gordon laughed boisterously.

"Isn't black as good a colour as the red—or was it blue?—that it displaced? Pah! come in. Don't stand staring there as though we were a muster of ghosts. Our sprits will glow with the colour of the ruddy wine," he continued gaily. "The hangings of a room cannot dim them."

In a moment more we were seated at the table, and the supper began. The wayward fancy of our host was as apparent in the luxuriance and display of strange dishes as in all else about him. But that which attracted the most notice was a large, wide-flaring vase of stone that stood in the centre of the table. Curious figures of men and animals were drawn upon it, and seemed by a phosphorescent play of light from their lines to be endowed with a life and motion of their own. The vase was nearly filled with something unknown. And now a singular thing happened. As a guest let his eye fall upon the vase, he became silent, and was not able to withdraw his gaze from the glowing figures. So at last a strange silence—strange for the place, at least—fell upon the company. Even our host waited for some one to speak.

"A curious vase, that," suggested one of the company at last.

"Yes," replied Gordon gravely. "Very curious."

"Where did it come from?" asked another.

His answer, that it had come from the infernal regions, was received with a wild burst of mirth, in which, I remembered afterwards, he did not join. He turned the conversation to some other subject, and the mad wit of the company was roused anew.

At length the wine was brought on, and the glasses were filled. But before we could pledge, as usual, to our host, Gordon himself arose.

"You asked," he began, "why I have decked our festal room in black. I turned aside your question for a moment. I planned a surprise. It is not in sorrow, but in joy, that I have covered these walls with sombre draperies. To-night there is a new guest at the feast. For him have I changed the decorations of the room—to him must the first toast be drunk." So saying, he placed his foot on a secret spring, and a grinning skeleton, fantastically draped in a long robe and wearing upon his head a semblance of a crown, was advanced from behind the hangings at the table's head to the place that had been left vacant. At the same instant he flung a lighted match into the vase. The liquid blazed up with a pale green flame, that threw a ghastly pallor on all in the company. "Death is our guest to-night," he cried. "Drink, then, to your King! Fill high! Pledge deep!"

We looked at each other, and even the stoutest quailed as the greenish light threw a pallor as of deadly fear on every face. For a moment there was profound silence, and each one listened to the beating of his own heart. But it was only for a moment. The wild freak of our mad chief was received with a shout of laughter, and the boldest cried:

"Hail to King Death!"

We drank standing under the greenish light of the wavering flame—looking like a band of corpses drinking to their destroyer. When we were seated again, one of the company asked, with some fling of hare-brained wit:

"Why do we meet with Death to-night? Why do we misuse good wine by pledging him?"

"Are we not thirteen at the table?" asked Gordon, with a mocking smile, that the ghastly wavering light changed to one of demoniac mirth. "Is it not foretold by that, that one of us shall die within the year? What then could be more fitting than our pledge to Death? Long live King Death!"

And he ended with a burst of laughter, so harsh and horrible that it might have come from the skeleton image of Death itself.

Suddenly he stopped his riotous mirth, and stared with eyes starting from their sockets at the dark wall before him. There was a look of awful fear upon his face, as though he saw there before him the head of the Medusa.

Then with a shriek of agony, he clasped his hands over his heart, as if he were already in the halls of Eblis, and the fatal hour had come. For a moment he stood thus, staring at the nameless horror, then reeled, fell heavily against the table, and dragged the cloth with him to the floor.

In panic and terror we rushed from the fatal room out of the house. Out in the chilling wind that now blew a gale, we halted without hats or overcoats, and spoke to each other with bated breath. But no one dared ask another if he had seen the awful vision that had frozen the blood of our mad host. The one who was last to leave the room whispered that the vase had fallen to the floor, and he had seen the green flame blazing over the prostrate form.

No one proposed to go back. And as we stood there whispering, fearing, lights began to glimmer at the darkened windows of the room we had left. Tongues of fire darted between the dark draperies—green-tinted flames that began to glow with a dash of red. One by one the windows were uncovered, and through them we could see the flames rising and falling, filling the whole room.

One of our number whispered that strange forms moved amid the blaze, and, indeed, it took but small fancy to make them out.

Horror at the awful fate of our companion froze all motion from us, and we could only watch the fire creep from window to window until the house was a mass of roaring flames. As they shot upwards from the roof, lighting the country like a great torch, the alarm of the fire was raised far and wide, and a crowd soon gathered round.

But there was nothing to be done. Hour by hour the flames blazed up and danced before the gale, until with a mighty crash the walls fell inward, and the madman's house was a heap of smoking ruins.

E. A. W.

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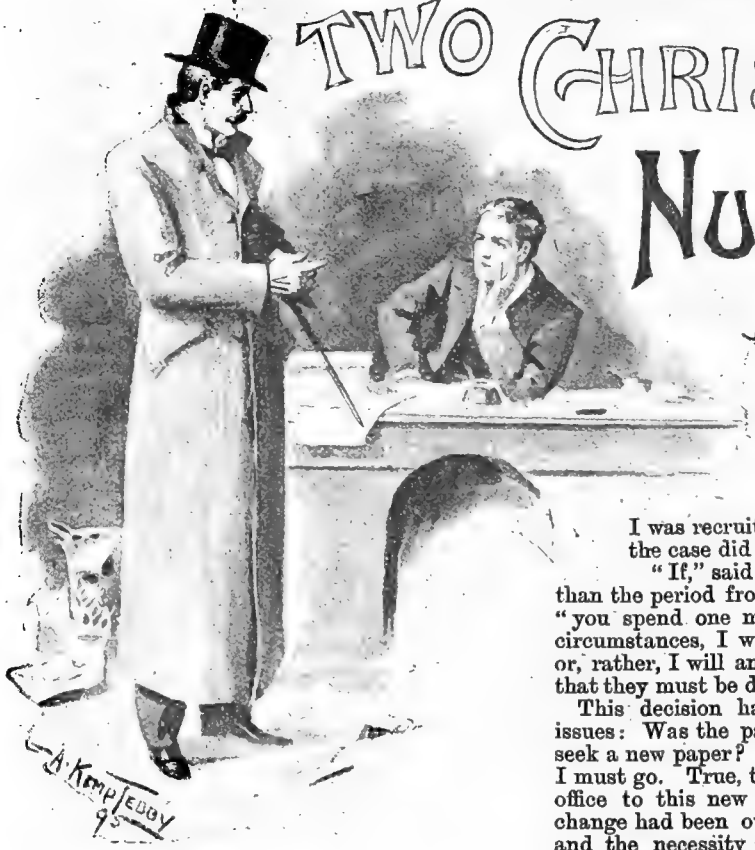
TWO CHRISTMAS NUMBERS



FOR some years I was sub-editor of the *Illustrated Social Review*. It is devoted to—but I will not stop to puff the *Review*, explain its scope, or describe its method. The completeness of my disinterestedness will be felt when I assure my reader that I have received all the money I have earned of it; that there is no likelihood of my earning any more; and that in the week preceding Christmas last year I ceased to be connected with the paper.

In justice to myself I must say that my retirement was not caused by anything within the jurisdiction of my prudence or my ability. I resigned because I was suffering from fierce nervous excitement, which, my doctor soothingly assured me, threatened either my life or my sanity; he could not say for certain which.

"If I resign," said I to my doctor, "I lose the greater part of my income."

"If you don't resign," said he, in a tone that indicated his final opinion was in the words, "you will go over to either the great majority—the dead—or the lesser majority of the living—the fools."

I was not alone in the world. My people at home took an interest in me, and looked to me for housekeeping money, and I had been too long connected with the *Illustrated Social Review* not to have a well-defined notion of my duty as a social being; so I made up my mind (having some left still) to take my doctor's advice, and to live—well, to live in sanity.

If there had been any chance of my being able to resume my duties in six months, I have no doubt that the owner of the paper would have consented to accept the services of a substitute while I was recruiting my health; but the condition of the case did not allow this.

"If," said my doctor to me earlier in the case than the period from which I last quoted words of his, "you spend one more night in that office under any circumstances, I will not answer for the consequences; or, rather, I will answer for the consequences, and say that they must be disastrous."

This decision had narrowed the question to two issues: Was the paper to seek a new office, or was I to seek a new paper? The reply was sadly obvious to me. I must go. True, the paper had changed from the old office to this new one only a week before; but that change had been owing to the expansion of the paper and the necessity for more extensive offices, and had had nothing whatever to do with the nerves of any one of the staff.

In the week preceding Christmas two years ago a certain event took place. I shall now relate that event here.

The Christmas number of the *Illustrated Social Review* appeared each year the week before Christmas. It was not an "extra number," but the ordinary weekly issue swollen to about double the usual size. The literary matter of the Christmas number did not differ very largely from the literary matter of the ordinary weekly part. There was usually a long story illustrating some striking social question, and this story formed the only literary innovation on a routine number.

We went to press on Thursday night each week. Sometimes I was able to get away from the office at ten o'clock; often I did not find myself in a position to initial the sheets until past midnight. The Christmas number being the most important of the year, I rarely could get away until two or three in the morning. My chief usually looked in at about ten o'clock just to see that all was in order, and then left me. On Thursday night, the week before Christmas, 1893, the editor came at ten, we had a somewhat lengthened chat, he looked at the last proof-slips, and then left me to revise the pages and see the whole paper together and "pulled" before I took my leave.

It was a quarter past twelve o'clock when he and I

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shook hands, and he went slowly down the iron-edged stairs.

The printing-office was in a court off Fleet Street. In all the world there is no stiller place than one of these ghostly courts off Fleet Street, if the silence is not broken by the tear and chatter of printing machinery.

Winchester Court at the time my chief left was resounding to the rattle of two dozen machines. The room I was sitting in trembled like a frightened horse, the glass in the window clattered, and the whole air seemed torn by waves and cross waves of jarring noises.

In the basement of the house in which I sat three large machines were at work; on the ground floor four clanged and whirred; by my side, on the first floor, a gas-engine snorted, and shook its iron rack, and struggled like a chained wild beast striving to escape; while a number of lithographic machines croaked and muttered all round me like a swarm of monster bull-frogs or a flight of gigantic mosquitoes.

This uproar of machinery made it necessary to speak loudly in order to make oneself heard. The tone of ordinary conversation would seem a hoarse, indistinct whisper. No sound from the court outside could reach me, and no sound I could make would have any chance of reaching ears not within the four walls of my room.

Just before the editor left me the foreman printer had been down to take away some proofs and speak with the chief and myself. When the foreman was going away I had said to him:

"Well, Mr. Bain, when will you have anything more for me to look at?"

"Not for an hour, sir," was his answer; so that when I found myself alone, I looked round the room to try and find something I might read. With a sigh I resigned myself to my fate. There was nothing to read, nothing to do for an hour.

Although it was cold and raw and damp abroad, the room in which I sat was bright and warm. Indeed, it was almost too warm; the steam all round gave the place the close feeling of an oven. I had always noticed that after spending an hour or two in that room I felt as weak and weary as though I had sauntered all day through a strange city to meet some one who never came.

The room was not more than twelve feet by twelve. In the centre stood a shabby writing-table, at which I sat; opposite to me was the door ajar. A gas-jet was burning on the landing without; no other door opened on that landing. Between the table and the door stood a chair; across the high window stretched a large, deep desk, which filled up that whole side of the room; on my right-hand side, as I sat, stretched, from floor to ceiling, shelves upon which lay old wood-blocks and stereotypes of blocks. My table was jammed up against the shelf-case; into the room on my left side a press projected, leaving only about a foot and a half between the corner of the press and my table.

I was sitting in a dreamy reverie, when some one knocked softly, very softly at the door.

"Come in," I shouted, thinking it to be a boy with a message from the foreman printer.

Although my face was bent over the table, my eyes fixed on the paper, I was conscious that the door opened slowly, that the person who had knocked had not entered, and that it was a man, and not a boy with proofs, as I had at first imagined. I raised my eyes. A low-sized, square, powerful-looking man of about thirty-five stood with an air of great humility in the doorway, holding his hat in his right hand in front, and keeping his left hand behind him out in the landing.

Something about this man made me observe him closely. At the time I did not know why his appearance claimed my attention so strongly. He was almost in tatters. His boots were open at the toes; his trousers jagged at the heels and between the ankles; his hat, a soft felt one, was without a lining and green with age. His coat and waistcoat were of a dingy yellowish tweed; his trousers had once been a decent black, but now they were streaked and shiny.

"May I come in?"

From underneath a shabby, yellow beard a dirty blue scarf fell, and occupied the whole open space of the waistcoat. His face was white and calm, the forehead being singularly white and well formed.

"What can this man be? What does he want here?" were the questions I put to myself. "I can't guess, and I don't like him," were my mute replies. I was weak and low and nervous. I looked at the window—no chance of escape that way. I looked at the door—he barred it up completely, and one blow from such an arm as held his hat would dispose of me.

I knew the outer door was open; I knew he was not a printer; I knew no one was likely to pass up or down that staircase for a long time. I knew my voice might as well be buried six feet underground as in that room, for all it would avail me to summon assistance. What had that man in his left hand? Why did he keep his hand so strangely behind his back? What did this man want with me? I had never seen him before.

"May I come in, sir?" asked the man, in a dull hoarse voice.

"Yes," I answered. "What can I do for you? Are you sure you have not mistaken the room?"

"You are the sub-editor of the *Illustrated Social Review?*" he asked, crossing the threshold, and taking the handle of the door in his right hand under the hat. While he stood thus sideways, he still kept the left hand pointed towards the passage, and out of my sight.

"Yes," I answered again; and repeated, "what can I do for you?"

"May I say a few words to you in private?"

"I am quite alone."

"May I shut the door? I don't want anyone to see me in here."

I reviewed the case as swiftly as he spoke. If he had any harmful intention he could carry it out in spite of me; he could close the door at that moment and spring on me. If he had no harmful intention it was indifferent to me whether the door was open or shut. Thus in either case I might as well assent. I merely nodded an affirmative.

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Still keeping that left hand concealed from me, he shut the door, closed it carefully, and then turned the key! He stooped down near the door, deposited whatever he had in his hand on the ground, and approached the table. On the ground near the door I saw, when he moved a little aside, a large cup of tea, and in the saucer against the cup a big piece of bread.

A sharp pang of pity for this man went through me when I found what he had carried so cautiously and so secretly. I rose, went to the door, took up the cup and saucer, set them on the table, and, placing a chair for him, said:

"Sit down and take your tea while you talk to me. No one will want to come in here for an hour. Now, what do you wish to say to me?"

He looked at me for some time out of strange eyes, in which for a moment the audacity was a little subdued. He drew a long breath, and then spoke:

"Although you see me as I am now, I am a man of good education. I have never been regularly connected with the editorial part of any paper, but I have had something to do with newspapers for some time. I am doing a little reading here now. I did not want those common printers to see me in here speaking to you. Common men are so common, aren't they?"

I looked away from the poor fellow's tattered coat and starved bold eyes, and answered: "Yes."

"Common men are fearfully common. I was once in a poor-house, and I know. I didn't want these working printers, if they passed up or down, to see me talking to a gentleman; they make fun of me so. Do you know there is a conspiracy against me? Did you ever hear that?"

The point of a long knife was buried an inch in the table.

I looked back to him swiftly, and thought: "The man is mad; the door is locked, and the yells of a Titan could reach no human ears! Heaven be merciful to me, and compassionate towards those who depend upon me!"

I said aloud, assuming a tone of sympathy: "If I were you I should not bother about those common men. Won't you drink your tea?"

He shook himself, and passed his hand quickly, nervously across his white forehead; shook himself again; then he fixed his daring eyes on mine, and burst out suddenly and so rapidly that I could scarcely follow him:

"You are the sub-editor of the *Illustrated Social Review*; why aren't you the friend of the mad? Tell me that?" he shouted excitedly, thrusting his white face close to mine.

He shivered and drew back from me, stood up, shivered again. Then, covering his face with his hand for a minute, he remained immovable. In a few seconds his chest and shoulders began to heave, and I could hear him sob. Through his sobs he spoke: "My darlings, my darlings, good-bye! They did not let me say good-bye to you. They pounced upon me in the middle of the night, and carried me off and locked me up for three long years, and when I came out all my darlings were dead!"

His arms fell to his side as though he were shot through the heart. He threw up his white face, clenched his fists, and buried one under the breast of the mean waistcoat; then, raising his other hand clenched to Heaven, he shouted: "He took my wife and children from me! He killed them when I was locked up—he, John Kempston, did it; and, by the Maker of us two, John Kempston and me, I'll leave that in his heart some night!"

With an action so swift that I could not follow it, he plucked his hand out of his waistcoat; I saw something glitter above my head; and before I had time even to feel dread, the point of a long knife was buried an inch in the table, and the haft trembling between his face and mine.

He put his two hands on the table, leant down, and glared at the trembling blade.

A knock at the door. A second knock, the handle of the door turned.

* * * *

It was many days before I regained my customary peace and balance of mind after that disturbing night; and even when I had got back my usual tone in daylight, my nights were very trying for a long time.

I had always been nervous and imaginative; and it was a source of wonder to those who knew me well, and to myself, that I so rapidly recovered from the shock. But for months my nights were restless. If I sat up late at home, as I often was obliged to do, I dreaded to leave the room and the gaslight in which I sat.

If a door opened or a mouse ran across the floor, I looked up with a start, sure that I could see the rigid white face, the madman's blazing eye, the sharp flash of glittering brightness through the air; and then I felt the blade between my shoulders—not in the table, but between my shoulders—with the whole of the madman's weight pressing down upon the weapon.

I wonder I did not go mad. The brains of many men have been turned by less. After that memorable Thursday night I often debated with myself whether I should take any steps against the man who had so terrified me. But in reality he had neither done anything to me nor threatened me.

I made inquiries, and found that his name was William Dee; that he had been in a lunatic asylum for three years, during which time his wife and two children died; and that about a year ago he had been

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discharged as cured. He was regarded as "odd," "strange," "touched," but everyone to whom I spoke looked on him as perfectly harmless.

The form of his craze was peculiar, almost unique; he was mad about madness itself. Any illusion to insanity threw his mind at once off its balance.

He had first shown symptoms of insanity about five years before. Its earliest form was a delusion that every dwelling-house he entered had a mad-house attached to it, in which were confined members of the family afflicted with mental malady. The aggravated form of this delusion followed; and then he fancied that not only had every private house its own private mad-house, but that the inmates of the latter were cruelly and basely ill-treated.

Then he commenced to preach a crusade against these private lunatic asylums. He failed to attract any followers. He essayed the deliverance of the captives himself, and selected for the first attempt the house of Mr. John Kempston, of Long Acre. Mr. Kempston called in the police and handed William Dee over to them. The police sent him to the parish, and the parish to Colney Hatch.

His belief that Mr. Kempston stopped him at the outset of his great career, and that Mr. Kempston was personally the whole cause of his having been locked up, made him in his moments of excitement vow undying hatred and thirst of revenge against that man, who, however, was quite beyond the reach of Dee's anger, as he had emigrated to New Zealand soon after the unhappy Dee was first confined. It was only in the great pressure of business in the week before Christmas that Dee got employment at our printing-office. The week after Christmas he was gone, so that my chance of any more trouble from him was slight indeed.

In December next year the *Illustrated Social Review* changed publication-office and printing-office. The printing-office was now in Deerhound Court, Fleet Street.

As Christmas approached I was too busy to give much thought to my health. Several friends had remarked that I looked thin and worn. But I explained this to myself and them by saying I was greatly overworked, for not only had I then the ordinary work of my own paper, and the preparation of the Christmas number, but I had been employed to edit and write a good deal for a trade annual, and I was greatly worn down altogether.

It is a strange thing that, although I then looked upon myself as completely recovered from the effect of the events which occurred the Thursday night preceding Christmas, 1893, I never ran low physically from any cause without more or less suffering a relapse into the wretched state of nervous timidity which followed immediately upon the shock a year ago.

As in the former printing-office, we had an editorial room in the new one. It was, however, situated differently. In the old office it had been on the first floor. Here it was on the third, being the highest but the attic. It was a long, narrow room. At one end a window looked into the silent, deserted court. At the other end was the staircase to the upper floor, not partitioned off from the room.

My table stood in the window, and about twenty feet from the head of the staircase leading down through the stair-well, also not partitioned off. Although I call this the editorial room, of course we had another and much better room at the publishing office; but the one at the printing-office was the real one for hard work, and all the night work had to be done here, in order that I might be near to the printers.

The floor below was the printer's counting-house, shut up for the night; the floor above, an attic lumber-room.

We were much more forward with the work this year than we had been last. On Thursday night before Christmas week the editor went away at ten o'clock, leaving me in charge. "You'll be able to get off at about twelve," said he, as he tied his muffler round his neck at the top of the unprotected stair-well. While he was descending I heard a clock strike ten. I shouted to him to send up the foreman. He answered: "All right!" and for the first time I was alone by night in the new office.

The room was in strong contrast, and the surroundings in stronger contrast, to the room and surroundings of that day twelve months. The chamber was long and bleak, and an oppressive silence filled the court. In the basement of this house the machines groaned and muttered; but the sound was deadened and afar off: it seemed to desire to conceal itself from notice. I felt I should like to have had a dog or a child with me. It was very lonely up there; very dreary and lonely up there, away from every one.

At last I heard a foot ascending the stairs, and in a few minutes the hard features of the foreman rose above the level of the floor.

He came in, and we had a short chat about the work. As he was going, he said, with a grin, while he wiped his hands in his apron:

"You're quiet enough up here, sir. There's not more row here now than under the dome of St. Paul's at this moment."

"When shall I have the proofs of the pages up?" I asked.

"I'll send you up two or three in half an hour," said the foreman, as he disappeared down the stairs.

Once more I was alone in that long narrow room. I had nothing to do for half an hour.

"As quiet as under the dome of St. Paul's at this moment," I thought, adopting the notion of the foreman. "The grave is not so quiet as the vast chill concave of that dome now," I followed on, indulging my imagination.

There was only one gas-jet in the room, and that was on my table, so that the end of the room near the stair-well was in comparative darkness. I stared down into the dimness, and continued, following up the idea the foreman had started:

"What silence, what abysses of silence there are in that great chasm of darkness, the inexplorable dome! For no earthly consideration would I sit on one of those chairs now, with my back to all the echoing voices and ghastly tomb-incrusted walls."

I felt myself shiver, and cast down my eyes for a while to steady my thoughts. I strove to drive the idea from me; but it had seized firm hold of my imagination, and would not go.

The cold sweat now streamed down my forehead.

I raised my eyes, and saw ascending by the staircase through the ceiling the legs of a man!

At that sight the last resources of my physical powers failed. I could not stir to save my life. I had no desire to stir. I felt numbed and deadened, and sustained in consciousness by only one desire, a supreme curiosity.

I do not know how long I remained thus spellbound,

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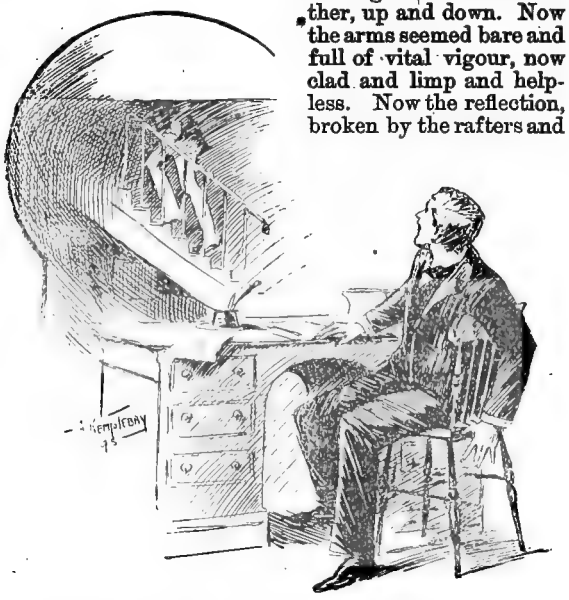
but it must have been more than a quarter of an hour. All that time the shadow of the man was ceaselessly moving hither and thither, up and down. Now the arms seemed bare and full of vital vigour, now clad and limp and helpless. Now the reflection, broken by the rafters and



I raised my eyes, and saw ascending by the staircase through the ceiling the legs of a man!

distorted by the cobwebs, was that of a pair of naked legs, now of legs loosely robed and supple.

At last it seemed plain that there were two figures in the loft.

I could now make out that the partly nude figure had on nothing but a shirt; this was the active figure. The other lay apparently on the ground close to the candle, and never stirred save when moved by the other.

Just then the stillness of this upper place was broken by a yell of enraptured rage. I saw a flash of keen cool light dash among the rafters, and then I saw the shadow of the naked arm spring aloft with something long and sharp-pointed in the hand. Presently this swept down to the accompaniment of a scream of hate. I heard the blade tear through and through, and bite deep into the plank. I watched to see the first red trickle through the cracked ceiling, for now the body was of no dead man, but of one drugged or stunned by other means.

I had lost all thought of my own personality now. I may say I had no longer any feeling of being present at this scene. I was no more than a pair of eyes that could not turn away from this square opening, and an intelligence swallowed up in the passionless contemplation of what the eyes revealed.

Here the light in the loft went out. But I heard other blows struck in the dark. At last the blows ceased, and I heard a sound as of some body dragged across the floor.

Two legs fell partly down through the trap-door—legs wanting the feet! Then the body and the limp, powerless arms.

My eyes never moved; no sound escaped me even when the acme of horror was reached, and I saw a bare left arm buried in the bosom of the figure, and a bare right arm whirled aloft and strike the bosom with a knife, and then, as the two figures rolled down the stairs into the room, saw that the trunk was headless!

The semi-nude man once more raised the blade above his head and buried it in the helpless man. Then stepping back a pace from the prostrate figure, he yelled: "Take your death of me, John Kempston!" As he uttered the last word he tripped in something, staggered back, and disappeared. I heard him strike the balustrade and fall to the flagged bottom of the stair-well. Then all was still.

When they took up the dead body of William Dee from the flags at the bottom of the stairs, they found nothing on it but a shirt. The rest of his clothes he had formed into an effigy upon which to wreck the vengeance he nourished against John Kempston. As in the last year in the old office, so in the present year at the new, he had got a job as extra proof-reader, with permission to sleep in the loft. His work was done, and he received a little money at nine o'clock. It was supposed he drank, and that the drink overcame his slight stock of reason, and betrayed him into the violence which led to his death.

They found me insensible, with my head bowed on the table. I have not even yet recovered fully. I have been asked to write a story, and I thought that I might as well recount my strange experience of Two Christmas Numbers.

The semi-nude man once more raised the blade.

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A PROPOSAL BY PROXY.

By Mrs. GEORGE CORBETT.

Author of "The Adventures of an Ugly Girl," "A Mere Masquerader," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

"GLADYS, will you go to the Elysian Theatre with us this evening?" inquired Miss Eady, though she had no doubt as to the nature of her friend's reply.

"Oh, Alice! Do you really mean it?" cried Gladys Youll, springing to her feet, and evincing every sign of glee. "There's nothing in the world I would like better. It is good of you to remember me. Who will be going?"

"Father, mother, and our two selves. We have a box for four, and it would have been a shame to waste a seat when you are so fond of the theatre. I expect we shall have a lovely evening, for everybody is raving about *The Flower Girl*."

"It is sure to be a lovely evening for me! What time must I be ready?"

"We will call for you at 7.30 prompt."

"I really don't know how I shall contain myself until it is time to go. I think I'll begin to dress in the middle of the afternoon."

Both girls laughed at this, for Gladys was one of the elder daughters in a busy household, and, instead of spending the day in preparing for an evening's amusement such as rarely came her way, she would need to be more industrious than ever.

The Youlls were a very united family, though they had a hard struggle to make ends meet, and when it was known that Gladys was to sport evening dress, both her mother and her sisters showed themselves anxious to make her as presentable as possible.

"You must wear my chiffon blouse. It is fresher than yours," said Eva.

"And I'll lend you my pearls," added Mrs. Youll, looking with fond pride at the girl who was the acknowledged beauty in a family of which every member was comely; whilst Gladys' other sisters volunteered their assistance.

"I shan't look the least bit shabby," she reflected, "thanks to the good nature of the others. I wish I knew how to earn some money, so that I might be really helpful at home."

Her thoughts often took this direction, but they generally ended in an impatient sigh for her parents belonged to the old-fashioned school, and contemplated no future means of providing for their daughters save matrimony.

But the whole world changed to her that night, for she had at last, she thought, found her vocation.

"Alice," she whispered, "I mean to go on the stage."

"Do you? Isn't that rather sudden? And won't it wear off just as suddenly? Every girl takes a fancy to the stage some time or other."

"But mine isn't merely a fancy of that sort. There are too many of us at home. I want to ease my father's burdens a little, and I mean to try and see Mr. Clarkson, the manager, to-morrow, about an engagement."

"But you have had no stage experience."

"And how much stage experience is necessary to pose as all those girls do? I don't mean the principals, for I am not stupid enough to imagine that I can get a big part straight away."

"No, I don't suppose you could manage that. But if there happens to be a vacancy you might stand a chance in the chorus You have both a good voice and a good presence. Yes, I would try if I were you."

Here the curtain rose upon the most effective act in a gorgeously produced burlesque, but, though Gladys was an eager onlooker, her thoughts were chiefly of a practical bent, and their outcome was nothing less than another visit to the Elysian Theatre next morning for the purpose of interviewing the manager, to whom she wished to apply for an engagement.

But busy managers are not easily interviewed, and several attempts were necessary before Gladys could get a word with Mr. Clarkson. When at last she entered his presence she was terribly afraid of being sent peremptorily about her business. He was, however, very pleasant and kind in his manner, as he put various questions to her in response to her application for an engagement. When at last he had learned all he wished from her he gave her a note to take down to the musical conductor.

"Mr. Fairlie will hear you sing," he said, "and if he is quite satisfied with you, you will probably hear further from me. Leave me your address so that I may know where to find you."

Gladys left the manager's presence with a heart beating high with hope, but this had plenty of time to evaporate before Mr. Fairlie had time to attend to her. There were about fifteen girls here, all having their voices tested. The ordeal was being gone through on the stage, but the voices had a strange, unreal sound, which meandered weirdly about the empty auditorium.

Mr. Fairlie was strictly non-committal. After each test he jotted down some items in a book kept for the purpose, and dismissed the candidate without the slightest hint of the results of her efforts.

Gladys fared exactly like the rest, and then passed through a period of suspense that was very trying to a girl of her impetuous disposition.

Meanwhile she was receiving more invitations than usual, and was becoming quite a gay young lady, being always aided by her generous younger sisters in her efforts to look as nice as possible.

"There will be nothing fit for anybody to wear soon," she reflected ruefully. "I've half a mind to decline Alice's invitation to spend a whole week with her, for it hardly seems fair to the other girls."

But poor Gladys was not equal to the self-sacrifice she contemplated, for the little god, Cupid, had struck her

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with one of his darts, and she could not deny herself the pleasure of meeting a certain Kenneth, surnamed Saxon, who was a frequent visitor at the house of the Eady's, and who was desperately in love with our heroine.

Unfortunately, he was too modest in his estimate of his own manly attractions to believe that so charming a girl as Gladys Youll would deign to think twice of him, and she, mistaking his shyness for indifference, was careful to give him no reason to guess her preference for him.

Mr. Saxon had a friend who was his almost inseparable companion, and who had also lost his heart to Gladys Youll. His name was Clarkson Dean, and he was very much more good-looking than his friend. But the preference of girls is not always to be accounted for, and neither of the young men imagined that Miss Youll seldom gave a thought to the one who was usually regarded with favour by mothers and daughters alike, since in character and fortune he was above reproach.

CHAPTER II.

For some days a feeling of reserve had been growing up between Kenneth Saxon and Clarkson Dean. Each knew himself to be in love, but each was shy about making the admission to his friend, and each was ignorant of the fact that they were both in love with the same girl. There was, however, this difference between the two young men.

Kenneth believed his love to be hopeless, and, therefore, did not dream of proposing to Gladys. Clarkson, without being particularly conceited, thought he had as good a chance as any other fellow, but hardly liked to face the possibility of rejection.

"I wish the business was nicely over," he thought. "A girl like that is worth anybody's winning, and there is no time to waste if I am to prevent somebody stepping in before me. But I really haven't the nerve to propose to her myself. For one thing, opportunity does not offer itself, unless I go into the matter boldly, and hunt Miss Youll up at her own home. Then I should be quizzed by all her sisters, and laughed at if she refused me. I know what I'll do. I'll get Kenneth to propose to her for me. People often do propose by proxy, and he could present the few advantages I possess better than I could myself. A fellow can't go boasting about his riches to the woman he wants to marry."

Thus it happened that Kenneth Saxon received a commission that almost took his breath away, but which he nevertheless made up his mind to discharge honourably.

"It's hard lines to be asked to propose for somebody else," was his rueful reflection, "but it's infinitely worse when the girl to whom you are to propose is the one you are in love with yourself. But Clarkson doesn't suspect me to have any personal feelings in the matter, and I'll discharge my duty honourably, though my heart breaks in the task."

"A gentleman to see Miss Gladys on business," announced the housemaid at four o'clock on the following day, and Gladys rose with heightened colour to receive her visitor. For a moment she imagined that he might be a messenger from Mr. Clarkson, and she hardly knew whether to be more pleased or disappointed when she saw Kenneth Saxon.

"I hope you will excuse my intrusion," the latter began, looking remarkably ill at ease. "The fact is, I am the bearer of a message to you. My friend Clarkson ——"

"Mr. Clarkson!" exclaimed Gladys delightedly, thinking that the manager of the Elysian Theatre was being referred to, and jumping at once to the conclusion that Mr. Saxon's message was the long-expected answer to her application for a theatrical engagement. "Do you know him?"

"Know him? Why, yes. He and I have been friends for years. That is why he asked me to see you."

"I hope your message will remove all my anxiety. I have been expecting to hear from him for some time."

"Oh! have you really? It's only about a month since you first saw him."

Kenneth was feeling a little surprised bewilderment, that was by no means diminished as the conversation proceeded.

"I believe it is only about a month ago," answered Gladys, who was as much at cross purposes as he was. "But there is plenty of time to make up one's mind in a month, and I really thought him horribly slow."

"Oh, indeed! Then you are quite prepared to accept his proposal?"

"Certainly. Don't I tell you that I have been waiting for it? Stay. There are, of course, certain pecuniary considerations——"

"You need not trouble about that, Miss Youll. I have Clarkson's authority for stating that he intends to be most liberal in pecuniary matters."

"Oh, isn't that lovely? And it's really an engagement?"

"Certainly, if you are willing to be a party to it."

"And when do you think I can see him? I want to come to a definite arrangement as soon as possible. Do you thing I might go and see him to-night?"

"Well, I don't know, Miss Youll. I'm not so sure that it would be quite the thing for you to do. I had better see Clarkson first, and tell him that my mission has been entirely successful. Then he will call and see you himself to-morrow morning, and you can arrange details between yourselves."

"Yes, that will be best. And tell him that it's a definite engagement."

"Oh, that's all right. As you say, it's a definite engagement. But I'd better be going now. I have done all that I can, and I feel——"

Poor Kenneth was going to say that he felt rather upset at the eagerness with which his friend's proposal by proxy had been accepted, and at the certainty that his own faint hopes were finally shattered. But he thought better of it, and welcomed the girl's jubilant interruption.

"Don't imagine that I am not grateful to you," she cried. "You have sent me into the seventh heaven of delight."

Kenneth Saxon quitted Miss Youll's presence, feeling more disgusted than he had ever dreamed it possible to feel with her, and pulled his moustache quite savagely as he strode towards Clarkson Dean's chambers.

"Well, if she isn't the most mercenary little wretch it was ever my lot to meet," he reflected. "She never inquired if he loved her, but thought of pecuniary matters straight away. Not much need either to beat about the bush with a girl who tells you plump that she has been expecting your message. I don't believe she cares a straw for him, for all she has accepted him. It's a purely mercenary business on her side, and it is a blessing that I didn't propose to her myself, seeing that

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I am, by comparison with Clarkson, only a poor man."

Clarkson Dean was looking through the window, which commanded a view of the street, for the return of his friend. All the while Kenneth had been away, he had been tortured by the conviction that he had taken a foolish step in proposing by proxy.

"I ought to have seen her myself," he muttered. "She is a high-spirited girl, and may resent the diffidence which made me afraid to propose to her in person. What fools men can be when they are in love. Ah! there he comes at last. Now to know my fate! If his glum face is an index to go by, I'm out of the running."

Poor Clarkson had barely patience to wait until Kenneth entered his sitting-room, so anxious was he to know what he had to tell him.

"Come, out with it, Kenneth," he said hastily. "Have I been refused?"

"On the contrary," was the reply, given without any of the elation which the occasion would seem to warrant, "on the contrary, you have been accepted with eagerness, and I had no difficulty whatever in delivering my message. You are to see her yourself to-morrow morning."

"Isn't that lovely!"

"That's just what she said."

"Did she really? I say, old fellow, you've done me no end of a service, and I shall be grateful to you all my life. Of course, you'll be best man?"

"Thanks, I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me."

"Excuse you, why? You like Miss Youll, don't you?"

But Kenneth's feelings had been probed enough for one day, and he felt a sudden access of emotion that made further conversation just then intolerable to him.

"I must be off now," he said desperately, and there was something in his dejected manner that suddenly revealed the whole truth to Clarkson Dean.

"Good Heavens," was the latter's reflection, "I do believe he loves her himself! What a brute he must have thought me."

But any regrets on Kenneth's score had no chance of being explained to that much-enduring young man, for he left the place without any further ceremony, and strode towards his own less luxurious lodgings.

CHAPTER III.

On the following morning Gladys took especial pains with her toilet, for she wanted to make as good an impression as possible upon Mr. Clarkson. She was ready by ten o'clock, and was waiting in the drawing-room when the servant announced "a gentleman to see Miss Gladys," and, rising eagerly to meet the theatrical manager, she was astonished to see Mr. Dean approach her with a beaming face that bespoke perfect satisfaction with the whole world.

"You darling!" he exclaimed, almost before the door had fairly closed behind the servant; "how shall I thank you enough for making me so happy?"

And then, before the amazed girl could fathom his intentions, he had her in his arms, and was kissing her passionately.

But he was soon convinced that he had made a mistake, for the young lady whom he believed to be his plighted wife struggled wildly to free herself from his embrace, and as soon as her hands were free she gave her adorer a push that sent him staggering to the other end of the drawing-room.

"How dare you!" she panted furiously. "What reason have I ever given you to suppose that I would allow you to kiss me?"

"What reason?" was the astonished reply. "Why, what better reason could you give me than to accept me for your future husband?"

"Accept you for my future husband? You must be dreaming, Mr. Dean!"

"Not if my proxy gave me a correct version of the interview that took place between you yesterday. He told me that you accepted my proposal without the slightest hesitation."

"But I have never seen anybody who had such an unusual message as a proposal to bring to me, and, in any case, I should scarcely be likely to accept anybody by proxy!"

By this time Clarkson was becoming uncomfortably convinced that there was something radically wrong somewhere, and he stammered rather than spoke his next question.

"Surely Kenneth Saxon was here yesterday?"

"Certainly. But he came on business connected with an engagement I have been applying for. He came from a Mr. Clarkson."

"He came from me. Don't you know that my name is Clarkson? Clarkson Dean?"

At this confirmation of a horrible doubt that had begun to assail her, poor Gladys turned so pale that Clarkson feared she was about to fall, and would have gone to her assistance, had she not waved him back.

"Do you mean to tell me that Mr. Saxon had no message from Mr. Clarkson, of the Elysian Theatre, for me?"

"I repeat that he was here entirely at my request, and if there has been a mistake of any kind, pray let me rectify it now. I have loved you ever since the minute I first saw you, and——"

"Oh, don't!" she moaned. "I can't bear it! I shall never get over this humiliation. And I suppose he despises me for all the horrible things I said! Do you know—I told him that I expected his message; that I was delighted to receive the proposal he brought me; that pecuniary considerations were of importance in the matter?

"Oh dear! I think I shall go mad! and to think that Kenneth could have the heart to bring me a proposal from anybody else."

By this time the girl was crying wildly, and poor Clarkson considered a speedy departure the best course for him to pursue. So he quitted the room at once, leaving Gladys to sob out her rage and humiliation at her leisure.

"The fact of the matter is that they are in love with each other, and I have been slow not to perceive before," he thought. "But my name isn't Clarkson Dean if I don't put matters right now."

* * * *

Mr. Dean must have been as good as his word, for when the writer last heard of Miss Youll she was engaged to be married to Kenneth Saxon. The manager of the Elysian Theatre has never offered her an engagement. But as she has given up all thoughts of going on the stage that doesn't matter.

Miss Eva Youll cannot understand her sister's failure to appreciate Mr. Dean. The latter is now more in love with Eva than ever he was with Gladys, and when he proposes to her he will certainly not do so by proxy.

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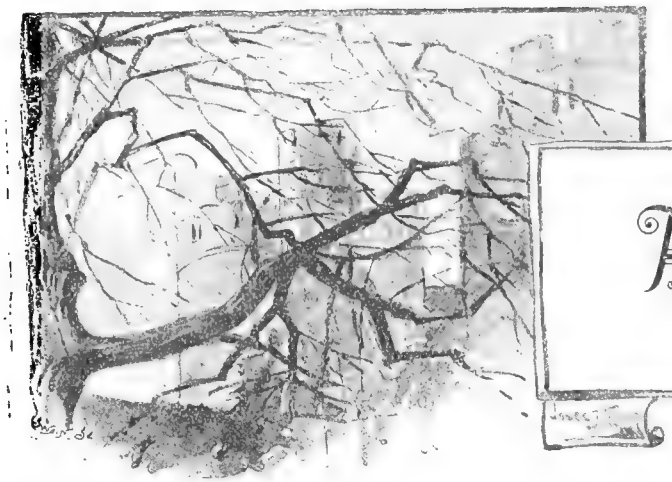

A RAILWAY GHOST.

AS there is a ghost in this story, according to all established rules it ought to commence with "once upon a time," but as I am somewhat of an iconoclast, not even such a venerable figure of speech can escape annihilation at my hands.

Let me be exact in chronology at least. I had been hastily summoned from Cornwall to the bedside of a wealthy old uncle from whom I had expectations, and as the telegram informed me that he could not survive his present attack of gout, I thought it might be as well for me to be "in at the death"; and so one foggy day in November, 1880, found me travelling to Ashbourne, a little out-of-the-way place, where the old gentleman lived. There were but a few passengers in the train, and I had the comfort of a carriage all to myself. We stopped at some little wayside station, when a passenger was hurriedly ushered, or rather banged, into my compartment by the conductor.

The stranger was a tall, thin, middle-aged man, with a face lean and withered like a shrivelled apple. In a dress, tight-fitting, and of an ancient and faded black, he looked like a man who had run very much to seed, which perhaps accounted for the luxuriant growth of his arms and legs. Observing his clothes steaming with the damp air, I began to realise that it had suddenly become very cold.

"Quite a change in the weather," I remarked. "Very cold to-night, is it not?"

"Don't feel the cold myself. Perhaps you would like to change places with me; there is no draught here."

I replied that I should be glad to do so if it did not inconvenience him, and accordingly we changed seats.

It was cold, and no mistake. I must have taken a chill, for I felt the cold creeping over me in a most unaccountable manner. Looking at my companion on whom the light now shone full, I saw that his face was not so thin nor his features so withered as I at first supposed; and I must have made a mistake as to his age, for he was by no means as old as I had previously judged.

How cold it was, to be sure! As I looked at him, noticed that his aspect changed momentarily—that he was growing younger; that the wrinkles in his face were filling out and smoothing down, and that he was gradually becoming like some one I had seen before. As his cheeks grew round and ruddy, and his hair changed from grey to brown before my very eyes, I became nervous, and endeavoured to cry out, but could not. I was paralysed with the cold—cold that seemed to make my limbs rigid and benumb my vitals, for I saw that the man sitting before me was no longer a stranger—no mere friend or acquaintance—he had become Me!

I held up my hands to try to shut out the sight, and, as I did so, I saw that they were withered, and thin, and old. I pressed them to my brow to see if I were dreaming, and I found it shrivelled, and seamed, and puckered. And then I knew that this man—this fiend—had stolen my body and given me his.

Maddened with the discovery I rose to my feet—his feet—which tottered beneath me, and struck wildly at the vision of myself on the other seat. But I found my arms light as vapour, for they passed over his body, which went through them, giving me the impression of pain. It was a body of shade that had been given me for my own body of flesh and blood, which this wretch had stolen. By some sorcery we had indeed changed places.

"Sorcerer—demon!" I cried out, only to hear myself speaking with his sharp, cracked voice. When I saw myself sitting opposite to me, coolly addressing me in my own voice, I could no longer credit my senses—if, indeed, I had any of them at all left of my own.

"I dare say you think you are speaking loud now," he said.

I answered by shouting for the guard as loudly as I could.

"Ah, you might call a good deal louder than that. Why, if the carriage were full of passengers they could no more hear you than they could see you," he continued, chuckling, and screwing my features up into a hideously knowing grin, such as *I* could never have made them assume.

"You see, my friend, yours is a body of air, of shadow, insensible, impalpable to all but myself, just as it was to all but you when I entered the carriage. You wish, perhaps, to know who I am. Well, two years ago to-night, I was a passenger by this train. There was a collision with a stupid goods train, you see, and the result was that several passengers were injured. One

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of them was—well, it's no use mincing matters—killed on the spot. Quite so. It was I. Yes, I am what you would call a ghost, although we do not consider that just the correct term among ourselves—we have a better word for it. Now I have told you what I am, you will, doubtless, like to know what I want. Very good; you shall see."

The ghost in my body then began to feel in my pockets, from which he drew out my meerschaum, which he filled from my pouch and lit one of my matches.

"Ah," he proceeded, puffing like a steam engine, "you smoke very good stuff—natural leaf and Old Judge; not a bad mixture, though I prefer a little Cavendish with it myself. Not at all a bad body yours either," he went on, eyeing the form in which he was sitting; "not at all a bad body; and it fits me to a T, only a little short in the arms. By the way, I find one of your front teeth a little loose, so don't go and say I did that, when you come to yourself again; and your nose is a little long for me, but I dare say it blows none the worse for that." I shuddered as I saw him take out my pocket handkerchief and use it on that cherished organ of mine.

"Yes, I dare say now you feel the cold a little; I did at first, but it's nothing when you're used to it. I find your body very warm—being heavier than I am accustomed to wear; but it won't be for long. I require it 'positively for this night only,' as you say in your playbills; and will return it uninjured by the time we get to Ashbourne. By-the-bye, let me beg of you to be a little careful how you throw your arms about so much as you did just now, for my body is of a more delicate construction than yours; and being so thin in substance, I am afraid you will chafe it under the arms.

"You will observe, ladies and gentlemen," he went on in lecturer's style, "that if I take a lighted match and insert it in the corner of the patient's eye, he will feel no pain." Saying this, my dreadful companion proceeded to illustrate his remark by making a dive at my shadowy eye with a burning match. I certainly felt no pain as the match burnt in my head.

"You will allow, after all you see, that my shape has its advantages," the ghost proceeded; "but it also has its disadvantages. Try the pipe now."

I tried to take the pipe—it dropped through my vapoury fingers. He placed it in my mouth; I could not hold it, nor get a whiff from it.

"Precisely so," said the ghost. "Now, this is just what has brought me here to-night. A great smoker all my life, doing my twelve pipes a day regularly, I have been defunct these two years, and during all that time I haven't had a smoke! Not a blessed draw. I miss my pipe dreadfully. There is a provision made for smokers down with us, you will understand; but we are governed by a board of directors, whose general incapacity equals that of many of your City boards. There is a stock of bodies kept for smokers, so that if you want to enjoy a pipe you must go into one of the bodies to get it. But if you will believe me, the supply is so notoriously insufficient to meet the demand that there is no chance whatever for a new ghost to get a smoke.

"When I entered the society all the bodies were out in use, and booked for three years in advance. My name has been down on the books for two years, and there is no chance of my getting a body allotted to me for a twelvemonth. Fancy two years without a smoke! Why, sir, the incompetence of our board is something awful. I can only explain the reason why we put up with such gross mismanagement in the other world is because we have become so used to it in this.

"Our constitutions, however, are being undermined to such an extent that the board has at length been coerced by popular feeling into passing a measure empowering ghosts to render themselves visible to a single individual at a time in order that they may effect a change of bodies for short periods, always with the consent of the person in question, for the purpose of indulging in a habit which the directors say they 'cannot, however, but characterise as pernicious and injurious.' George III. and George Washington, both members of the board, opposed the measure; they, however, were left in a ridiculously small minority. Under this new act I obtained your body."

"You never had my consent, fiend," I cried.

"It is vulgar to call names, my friend," the ghost replied, smoothing my moustache with my fingers; "but you are trifling. I asked you to change places with me, and you agreed, as you must be well aware. But, dear me! here we are at Ashbourne; but, however, I must finish my pipe—think of two years and not a blessed draw, my friend!"

The train was slackening speed. My companion leant out of the window puffing fast and furious.

"Plenty of time to change bodies," he said; "it shall be done in an instant, as soon as the train stops," and he continued blowing great clouds of smoke, till we pulled up at the station. He hurriedly knocked out the ashes of the tobacco, as the guard cried: "Change here; all change here, please."

A sudden glow of warmth seemed to pass over me as I rubbed my eyes, and found to my great delight my own smooth hands against my own unwrinkled cheeks. I looked up for my companion; he was gone; I was alone in the carriage.

I was greatly surprised, as I stepped on the platform, at being asked for my card by a very officious person; still more so at being summoned to the police court the following morning. The officious person stated that he was the secretary of the Anti-tobacco Alliance, and applied for a conviction against me, under one of the bye-laws of the company, for smoking in a railway carriage contrary to their regulations. He deposed to having seen me (only think, *me!*) leaning out of the window smoking a meerschaum pipe.

The guard testified that the carriage smelt very strongly of tobacco on our arrival, and that I was the only passenger. A meerschaum pipe, answering the officious person's description was found on my person. The case was clear, and I was fined two pounds. Nay, more—the case of my smoking in a railway carriage has been placarded at all the stations along the line, where I am hung up as a caution to the public, in a black frame, with my name and address and the amount of penalty enforced at full length.

It would have been useless to attempt any explanation to the magistrates. It is something to have set one's self right with the public.

W. G. Kelly.

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LOLA'S TWO LOVERS.

Twitters couldn't make it out at all. So sudden a change had come over his lot in life that he was completely bewildered by it. It was a very bad change, too, and in addition to being bewildered, he was also very sad indeed at heart.

Several times he had tried to sing, but it was no good; the notes that used to come so easily seemed to stick in his throat, and after an introductory chirp or two the trills which he once excelled at stuck and broke off short, and he lapsed into a moody silence, only relieved by a feeble fragmentary little twitter which was his way of saying that life seemed hardly worth living.

He was only a canary, but he had his feelings, and as he had been brought up in the lap of luxury, and had never known that there was such a thing as misfortune in the world, until it fell like a thunderbolt into a calm sea, the blow had very nearly broken his tender little heart.

A fortnight ago his daintily gilded cage had hung in one of the prettiest rooms imaginable. It had been the very luxury of imprisonment; in fact, it was not imprisonment at all, because the door had nearly always stood open, and he had had perfect liberty to go out when he chose, and flutter about the room, or, as he usually preferred to do, to make a tour of it perched on the shoulder, or sometimes on the outstretched finger, of his mistress—as beautiful and light-hearted a girl as ever listened to the love-song of a canary, or tried to imitate his notes with her own pretty lips.

And sometimes someone else used to be in the room—a well-dressed, good-looking young fellow, who was wont to playfully chaff his mistress about the rivalry that was supposed to exist between them. I mean, of course, between the man and the canary—"Lola's two lovers," as he used to call them. That was absurd enough, the idea of a man and a canary being rivals for a girl's affection; and yet there was no doubt about it, she seemed to love them both very much, and both of them certainly loved her, though whose love was the truest and the strongest time had yet to show.

And now this gilded cage, with the door fast shut, was hung up in quite a different sort of room; not an uncomfortable one by any means, but altogether lacking in the luxurious artistic refinement of his first home. The people, too, were quite different.

There was a stout woman, and a rather cross man who came in of an evening, generally tired, and usually a little out of temper, And there were also three or four noisy children, who used to come and run their nails along the bars of the cage, and poke bits of sugar between them, as if they would bribe him to try and imitate their unmusical whistling, as though the half-broken heart of a canary could be healed with sugar.

Sometimes he had tried to sing so as not to appear ungrateful, for the children really seemed to mean kindly, but when he broke down in his first trill they looked disgusted, and once or twice he heard them say:

"Well, they told us at the sale that he was a beautiful singer, but he doesn't seem able to sing a bit."

But, after all, what did they know about singing? No more than they did about the sorrows which had stifled his song and robbed him of the power of which he was once so proud. It was getting quite unbearable. A few weeks ago he had been wont to look out of the window at the birds in the garden with a sort of pitying contempt, considering them a kind of vagrants, without any settled home or people to attend to them when they wanted sugar or seed, or water for a bath.

But now he had come to think that they were better off than he was—at any rate, in his present circumstances. At the worst, they were free and could fly where they liked, but no one ever opened the door of his cage now, however much he fluttered against the bars, and this idea had grown upon him until the desire to escape had become as nearly a passion as a canary could be possessed with.

At last an opportunity offered itself. One of the children, when there was nobody else in the room, opened his cage-door and tried to catch him. He eluded the intruding hand, slipped out over the little red arm, and in another moment he had fluttered out of an open window and perched on a green tree, in the full light and warmth of the midsummer afternoon sun.

He rested there a bit after his excitement, and then went farther afield, but he found flying in the open air a very laborious business, and the more he saw of the great new world into which he had escaped the less he liked it. It was too big and unhomely-looking, and it seemed peopled with dreadful creatures.

At last, after much flying and fluttering hither and thither, he had reached a pleasant place indeed, like an enormous garden, full of trees and flowers, and a multitude of white stones and little marble buildings that looked like houses, although no one ever seemed to go into them or come out of them.

He felt quite at home there, and happier than he had done since he was taken away from his first home, and at last when he was perched on the top of a new white stone with a little mound of green turf beneath it, his gift of song came back, and he suddenly felt all his sorrows fall away from him, and he poured forth such a flood of silver song that all the other birds in trees about him stopped and listened, it might have been a trifle enviously, as amateurs might listen to a trained professional.

In the midst of his song the heavens suddenly darkened, a fierce wind, hot and suffocating, swept through the trees, bright dazzling streams of flame leapt hither and thither, and a great roaring noise completely drowned his song. And then everything grew darker still, and the song ceased for ever.

That same afternoon two young fellows were sitting at the open window of the smoking-room of one of the clubs in Pall Mall. One of them was the Hon. Roger Landon, a dark, strong-featured, good-looking young fellow of about twenty-seven, and the other was a fair-haired youth three or four years his junior, with an open, honest, or rather simple-looking face, save for the indefinable expression of what the French call *savoir faire*, which is almost invariably found on the face of a man who has had two or three years' experience in the ways of the metropolis.

This was Mr. Freddie Dumville, the Hon. Roger's pupil, and *fidus Achates*. Both were smoking—Freddie a cigarette, and the Hon. Roger a large and strong cigar. Both were looking anything but cheerful, and both puffed the smoke out from between their lips in the intervals of their conversation in long meditative streams which wreathed themselves into blue spirals above their heads in the heavy atmosphere of the smoking-room.

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"And so the poor little girl really took it to heart to such a dreadful extent as that?" said Roger after a long silence. "If I'd only known——"

"Ah, yes, if you'd only known. That's what one always says when the harm's done. Of course, I don't mean to say that as a man of the world you could have done anything else than you did, and, as the world would say, you behaved very handsomely to her; but she wasn't a common sort, you know, and, really, Roger, she was awfully fond of you. I suppose that is why she took it so much to heart. It was that, and what the doctor called heart disease when I called him in, that carried her off so quickly."

"Hang it all, man, don't talk in that confoundedly matter-of-fact tone! It's next door to accusing me of murdering the girl. I did what I could under the circumstances. I was just as fond of her as she was of me, but you know the awful mess I should have got into if I hadn't married Lady Janet and her £200,000. Why, I couldn't even have kept the establishment going for another six months, and after all, you know, I couldn't have expected this to happen when, if everything had gone on all right, I could have——"

"No, you couldn't have, old man. Lola wasn't that sort. In fact, she was a lot better than a good many who wouldn't have walked on the same side of the street with her."

"Yes, yes, I know she was, and that makes it all the worse. Well, go on. As the honeymoon has been interrupted for me to come and hear the news, I may as well hear it all. Tell me what you've done."

The Hon. Roger turned a shade or two paler as he ground the words savagely between his clenched teeth. His friend noticed the change in his manner not altogether with disapproval. He looked half pityingly across the window at him, and then went on in a voice that might have been a good deal steadier:

"Well, I did as you told me. As soon as the knot was tied, I went and broke it to her as gently as I could, and—well, as I have told you, it killed her. The doctor I called in called it heart disease, and so it was, I suppose.

"I buried her in Norwood Cemetery, and gave it out that she was the wife of a friend of mine who had sailed a week or two before for Gibraltar. Then I put the place into the hands of an auctioneer and had everything sold, because I didn't think you'd want to keep any mementoes of the episode, and I gave the same man the job of letting the house, and—well, I think that's all."

"Yes, you did quite right, old man, and you've behaved like a regular brick, and put me under an everlasting obligation. There is only one thing I should have liked you to have kept, but of course you wouldn't know that, and that was poor little Twitters, the canary. He went, too, I suppose, with the other things?"

"Oh, yes, he was bought, I believe, by a Norwood gentleman, who was something in the City. He promised he should have a good home, and I hope he has. He was a jolly little bird. I say, I think we're going to have a thunderstorm."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before the first flash of lightning blazed out, followed by a peal of thunder that set all the windows in the club-house rattling. The two sat and watched the storm in silence for nearly half an hour, and then they got up and went to dinner.

Roger Landon ate little and drank much, but the liquor seemed to have no effect upon him save to still further darken the sombre humour that had fallen upon him. Dinner over, he got up and said:

"I shall go to the cemetery to-morrow. Give me a bit of a sketch so that I can find the grave. No, old man, I don't want you to come with me. I want to go alone, and I shall."

"Very well, if you will, though I think you'd better let me come. Of course, if you won't; well—there you are, you can hardly miss it with that, because it is right on the side of the walk."

While he was speaking Freddie had made a rough, rapid sketch on a leaf of his pocket-book, which he tore out and handed across the table to his friend.

That night the Hon. Roger Landon walked the streets with an aimless, feverish energy until nearly two o'clock in the morning, and then let himself into the bachelor chambers which he had retained until Lady Jane's town-house was ready for occupation at the end of the interrupted honeymoon.

As soon as it was light he let himself out again, and started off towards Victoria Station. There he loitered about impatiently until the first train for Norwood started. When he got to the cemetery the gates were still closed, but the gatekeeper was up and half-a-crown opened them.

Refusing the man's proferred guidance, he set out to find the grave alone, and, thanks to Freddie's plan, he had little difficulty in doing so.

The headstone was already up, and on it he read, through the first tears that his eyes had known for many a year, the simple inscription:

"Lola, the beloved wife of Leslie Rogers. Born January 21st, 1873. Died June 25th, 1894. Whom the Gods love die young."

When he had read this inscription his eyes fell to the neatly turfed mould below the stone, and there, with the dew of the early morning glistening on its golden features, lay a little dead canary.

A few minutes later one of the gravediggers going to his work passed along the path, and saw a well-dressed man, with a white, set face, kneeling beside the grave, lifting one of the sods with his hands and putting something underneath it. As he stopped involuntarily at the strange sight, Roger looked up. The man touched his hat respectfully, and said:

"Morning, sir. It was me as dug the poor young lady's grave a fortnight ago. Yesterday afternoon, just afore the thunderstorm, there was a canary singing something wonderful on that stone. I suppose the storm would have killed it."

"Yes," said Roger. "It died here, and I have just buried it."

"Yes, to be sure, poor little thing," said the man. "No offence, sir, but perhaps you might be the young lady's husband. I heard at the funeral that he wasn't in England then."

"No, I wasn't," said Roger, rising from his knees. "I have just come back. Yes, this lady was my wife, and I want you to look after the grave properly. Will you?"

"I will, sir, thank you, sir!" said the gravedigger, touching his hat again, and staring, open-eyed, at the sovereign lying in his rough, brown palm. "Ah, poor gentleman. He's a real gentleman, too, he is," he went on soliloquising to himself, as he watched Roger walking slowly down the path towards the cemetery gate.

GEORGE GRIFFITH.

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The Treasures of the White God

SUMMARY.

Robert Lane, escaped convict No. 407, *alias* Adrian Burgoyne, is tracked to the World's Fair Grounds at Chicago. He is last seen, after an exciting chase by Mr. Inspector Grey and his assistant, Detective Dean, locked in a burning boat on the lake. Detective Dean finds a cipher in the convict's bed, which he sells to Mr. Richard Sheldon for £2 000. A Col. Lytle calls on Sheldon. They recall Burgoyne's history as follows: Ralph Ringold, when dying in Mexico, left a packet containing £6,000 in the hands of Burgoyne for his friend Richard Sheldon, whom he appointed guardian of his daughter Patrice's fortune. Burgoyne overheard Lytle and Sheldon arranging to appropriate the treasure, and threatened to expose them. They caused him to be convicted of a crime, and sentenced to penal servitude for life.

They then discovered, when too late, that he had with him in cipher the secret to Ralf Ringold's hidden fortune and treasures in Mexico.

The cipher is now in their possession, but Patrice Ringold has the key. Adrian Burgoyne escapes from the burning boat.

CHAPTER VII.

Disguised.

A cold north-east wind had sprung up since sunset, and the night boded chill and discomfort for the lonely refugee.

A forlorn figure on the dreary landscape, a token of warmth was cast about him, as two hours after leaving his hiding-place of the day the convict neared the source of the flame that had been a guiding star to him across unfamiliar stretches of sand and prairie.

It proved to be a great roaring blast furnace, but surrounded by walls and a gate.

Near by, however, were grouped a score or more of kindred factories. Here the cupola of a wire mill showed, there the gaunt staunch chimney of glass works.

Viewed as a whole, through red-lighted windows and great open doors, the vast industrial community of night workers resembled gnomes engaged in infernal artifice. Here a figure garbed in sombre moleskin suit would plunge a rod into the seething heart of some towering furnace, to bring forth its fiery life-blood in bubbling, scintillating streams. Beyond the dazzling glare of a bursting ingot of steel would shower marvellous fireworks across and around a group of dusky, brawny workers, and, flaring out, seem to leave a grim black hole in the picture.

At the open door of the glass factory Adrian Burgoyne paused, with a sigh of exhaustion. He experienced a longing for the warm glow of the seething pots; he bestowed a hungry look at the second-shift men enjoying their wholesome lunch from tin pails and little wicker-baskets. Then falling to smoking, they began pelting each other with the crusts and remnants of their meal.

The wayfarer thought of Lazarus. Each one of these poor artizans was a veritable Dives in the profligacy of his waste of the food that to the refugee would be a rare morsel of delight. As a bell rang, and the men sprang to relieve the night gang at their work, Burgoyne stole through the open door, glided to a bench away in the shadow, and nestled there, enjoying the luxury of perfect rest, and the warm, grateful glow of the heated air of the place.

Then he fell to cautiously fishing for the remnants of food within his reach. Tired nature revived under the combined influences of food and shelter. Want was at rest now. He half closed his eyes, nodded, slumbered ere he was aware of it, and awoke with a start, struggling to his feet and rubbing his eyes, for the moment unable to comprehend and analyse his environment.

"The glass works," he murmured to himself, with arousing faculties. "How long have I slept?"

"Out of the way, there."

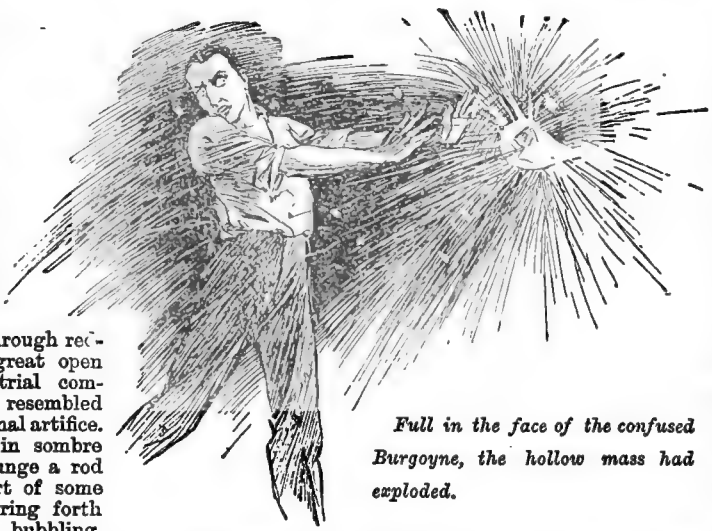
He was crossing the space between the bench and the door as the mandate rang out. A worker, swaying a great mass of molten glass on the end of his blow-pipe, was coming directly towards him, intent on spinning it across the foaming wheel ere it cooled.

Burgoyne sprang aside towards the furnace to evade a collision with the man.

"Not that way! Hang it, man! Stand aside."

A second voice, more alarming than the first, announced a new peril.

So confusing were the contrary injunctions, that, bewildered, Burgoyne tried to make a dash for the door.



Full in the face of the confused Burgoyne, the hollow mass had exploded.

He recoiled with a shock and a gasp of alarm as he did so, for the forward movement had landed him bolt upright against a second workman.

The latter was blowing out his glass ingot into a

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balloon-shaped bag. Against the mass Burgoyne stumbled.

A sound like the collapsing of a gas-ball echoed on the air. It was mingled with a wild scream of mortal agony.

For, full in the face of the confused Burgoyne, the hollow mass had exploded. A fiery thrill traversed face, hands, and neck; a thousand pricking, darting splinters of flame seemed to permeate his being.

A couple of workmen grasped him.

Half blinded, agonised with the frightful hurt, he knocked the worker fairly from his feet in a dash forward.

A large tub stood near the door filled to the brim with some solution.

He fairly floundered down beside it. He thought it water. He made a great dive to pierce its soothing, cooling depths to allay the frightful pain caused by the searing contact of the red-hot glass.

"Not there!"

"Stop!"

Two separate voices rang out the simultaneous warning.

Too late! The sufferer heard not, heeded not. Clear to the shoulders he ran head and neck, up to the elbows he dug his smarting hands into the cooling liquid.

Then swaying, half suffocated, he reeled back.

A couple of workmen grasped him on either side, as he bade fair to totter.

"Hurt?" queried one.

Adrian Burgoyne moaned inarticulately.

"He's done it!" muttered the other. "Get him to the bench. He's got a double dose and the last one—"

The speaker ended his comment with a gruesome and significant look at the sufferer.

Then they led him to the bench, propped up his head on a pillow formed of their coats, forced some fiery decoction poured from a flask between his lips, and left him.

His frame racked with vague, torturing pains, his senses swaying, his brain a maze, the ensuing few hours and their occurrences were a partial blank to Adrian Burgoyne in after life.

He was dimly conscious that some accident other than contact with the burning glass had occurred to him, but he could not divine what. He realised that a new weakness, the incipient delirium of fever, was beginning to riot through his brain. He was near the city. Suppose, taken ill, he should be sent thither. The case would be reported to the police and the police would recognise him.

No one saw him as he struggled to his feet, oppressed by fears that drove him to seek a safer refuge. He staggered outside the glass factory. The fresh, brisk air revived him somewhat, but he stumbled on his way like a drunken man.

One hour or ten, two miles or twenty—he took no comprehending heed of the lapse of time, the extent of territory traversed. Warning instincts drove him from the direction of the city. He pursued a blinded course, much as would a sick animal seeking only a quiet spot where it could lie down and die. At last overworked nature gave way. He had been threading the streets of some little town. Across a stone doorstep, above which gleamed a red light, he sank, utterly done out.

When he again opened his eyes he was in a large, warm room, lying on a couch. It was brightly lighted, but ominously still. At a desk sat a man writing. The scratching of his pen and the monotonous ticking of a clock over his head alone broke the stillness of the apartment.

Where was he? The refugee could reason out that he had fainted away in the street, and had been housed by some charitable soul, but where?

Ah, voices! He roused himself. A man entered the room and spoke to the writer at the desk. He pointed curiously at the recumbent Burgoyne.

"What's that?" he asked. "A drunk!"

"No; some poor fellow done dead out. Half-past two! Sound the gong, will you?"

A clanging echo jarred the nerves of the convict. It reminded him of his late home, the prison.

He started, he gasped, he shrank. Was he dreaming? Were his old fears, the haunting dread of every waking hour since his escape, assuming tangible form and substance?

For, at the sound of the gong, a score of men began to file into the room. They were belted, helmeted, uniformed, and upon every breast gleamed the official badge of authority of an officer of the law.

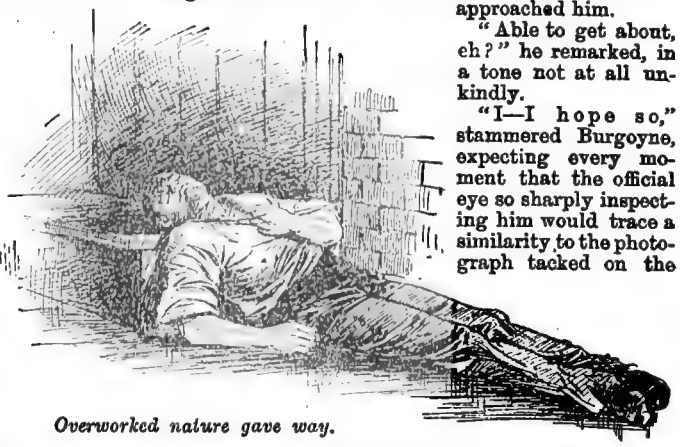
"A police station!" fairly chattered the refugee. "What fate sent me here?"

He sat up, and glanced steadily towards the door. Then, with a shock, his eyes became riveted on a blackboard just behind him.

It bore all kinds of written and printed notices—strayed, lost and stolen descriptions, municipal proclamations, department orders, and a little handbill, containing a small photograph in one corner, while across its top the ominous words: "Escaped—Reward."

His picture, *his* description! The notice scattered broadcast by the prison authorities! Was he safe nowhere? Was there no corner of the earth where this hideous reminder of the past would spring from the depths to confront him?

The officers filed out of the station as they had filed in. The refugee shrank back as the man at the desk arose and approached him.



Overworked nature gave way.

"Able to get about, eh?" he remarked, in a tone not at all unkindly.

"I—I hope so," stammered Burgoyne, expecting every moment that the official eye so sharply inspecting him would trace a similarity to the photograph tacked on the blackboard not two feet above his head.

"All right—tramping it? in hard luck? We found you outside the door. Here, follow me. I'll get you something to eat, and start you on your way tinkered up a bit."

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Burgoyne rallied his faculties, and followed the officer. He had not been recognised; he would soon be able to leave the station. He would be wary how he came into contact with the law again. He was believed to be dead, but that intelligence had probably not yet reached the suburban stations, and he marvelled that the officer, with the reward and description probably fresh in his mind, had not traced the resemblance between the man he had cared for and the photograph.

"Here you are—coarse prison fare, but you look as if you won't be particular," remarked the man, leading Burgoyne into a small room, and pointing to a table on

Caught sight of a little willowy and neatly apparelled form.

which was a tin cup and a loaf of bread, and then to a little stove containing a steaming pot of coffee.

"I do not know how to thank you!" murmured Burgoyne.

"Don't try; that's all right," bluffly responded the officer. "You can tramp on, or sleep here till morning, as you choose. There's a sink and a towel in the corner yonder. You look as if you needed them."

With these words he left the room. With these words, too, Adrian approached the sink.

Just above it was a little mirror. About to plunge his hands into the water, he chanced to glance within the looking-glass.

"Great Heavens! It cannot be possible!" The wild, uncontrollable words were forced from his lips spasmodically.

With a vivid shock, he recoiled, and then, held spellbound, he stared into the little mirror as if fascinated.

For the first time since he had assumed the *rôle* of Robert Lane did convict 407 view the presentment of his reflected features.

He stared, he gasped, he marvelled. This Adrian Burgoyne? This the convict, the refugee, the placarded fugitive of the State?

He did not know himself. He had longed for a disguise that would prove impenetrable to friend and foe alike. It was awarded him.

For the fire on the boat had denuded him of all hirsute appendages on face and head. Even the eyebrows, the lashes were gone.

The plunge into the vat at the glass works had been a dip into some corroding fluid employed in treating the ingots.

It had bronzed face, neck, and arm. It had changed, as if by magic, every familiar token of his face.

Only the eyes retained their old-time look. Brown as a Malay, changed, peculiar, convict No. 407 had assumed a completely new identity.

Through hardship, torture, suffering, the consummation had been attained. He was "disguised" indeed. He was safe. A victim of fire, flood, and the art chemical, Adrian Burgoyne had emerged into an identity that would baffle the shrewdest detective on earth.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Key to a Fortune.

Boldness—that was the leading characteristic of Richard Sheldon's nature. Prompt, decisive action in an emergency was the merit with which his ally, Colonel Lytle, seconded his employer's interests.

"The girl" had the key to the cryptogram. Ralph Ringold's deluded and neglected daughter had the solution to the cipher message which was a guide to a fortune rivalling the dowry of a princess.

"It looks like plain sailing to me," announced Lytle, after the revelations of his accomplice. "The matter is clear—a fortune is hidden; that bit of parchment in your hand tells where. The daughter of the rightful owner has the key to the same. The girl must be seen."

"Yes; you must visit Patrice at once."

"Me!"

"Why not? I have never seen nor approached her. I have studiously remained in the background, refusing to appear, for fear of later complications, intrusting the care of the girl to you."

"And as your agent I have faithfully carried out your instructions."

"And Patrice?"

"Has passed the last four years of her life with a widow—a Mrs. Loring."

"Where?"

"About forty miles south of the city, at a little hamlet called Lynde."

"Very good. She has been led to suppose that she is an orphan and a pauper. She believes me to be a very distant relative, who, from sheer charity, has provided her with a humble but comfortable home. Let that impression remain. The girl is a problem for later consideration, although I do not see how she can ever gain an inkling of the truth. She is safe where she is. Allow her to remain there, a dead issue in the case, except for what she may know concerning this cryptographic message."

"But," interpolated Lytle, "if she is to read it—to translate it—she must, perforce, obtain a knowledge of its import."

Sheldon scowled irritably.

"Why should she? Are you not keen enough to first learn in what guise this alleged key exists? It may be a mere alphabet that she possesses. If not, and it is some knowledge of an obsolete Aztec or cipher system of signs mutually acquired by herself and her father, you can lull her suspicions by some specious story and submit the parchment message in fragmentary parts. I leave it to you. When will you go?"

"At once."

That was the agreement, and that was Colonel Lytle's intention, but circumstances forced a delay he had not anticipated. He was interested in horse racing, and details of a match for the ensuing week required his attention. Engrossed in these, a day was consumed, and it was not until the afternoon of the one following that he left the train at the little village of Lynde, bent on a visit to the daughter of the man who, in his blind confidence, had fallen a victim to the designs of unscrupulous plotters.

The cottage occupied by Mrs. Loring abutted on a stretch of garden, wood, and meadow combined, that led to the

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river, a few hundred yards distant. A rare sylvan retreat, and as the schemer came near and caught sight of a little willowy and neatly apparelled form near a rude, rustic summer-house, a flash of sentiment brushed aside momentarily the tarnish, the dust, the blight of a profligate life.

Only for a moment, however. Then, an apprehension of the peace, beauty, and content of rural life gave way to sordid considerations, and the old sinister expression returned to his hardened, worldly features.

"Zounds! what a face!"

Colonel Lytle had opened the gate, and advanced, unceremoniously and unannounced, down the gravel path. He came upon the one occupant of the garden unobserved. Gazing across the shrubbery to where she stood trailing a troublesome vine into its proper place, transfixed, he watched the graceful form, the wild rose face.

It was Patrice—the daughter of the plundered Ralph Ringold, the victim of Richard Sheldon's iniquitous designs—and the rare innocence of feature, the open, frank trustfulness of the calm hazel eye, told that her gentle nature had known little of guile or guilt, even at a distance.

No marvel was it that her bonny face entranced the Colonel! Since he had last seen her, the girl had grown into a woman, the promise of the bud had expanded into a flower of golden loveliness. Form and feature were perfect as those of a nymph, and the winning beauty of a soul, pure as that of an angel, looked forth from the expressive eyes.

"Patrice!"

The fair young girl started like a shy bird as the tones of the Colonel broke the silence. With a pretty confused blush on her winsome face, she regarded him dubiously.

"Ah, you have forgotten!—you do not remember me!" he exclaimed, simulating the bluff heartiness of some fatherly friend, and extending his hand and taking her reluctant own in a close, caressing grasp.

"I fancy I do, but——"

"Four years, with only a flitting visit between, means much for a child grown to be a maiden," pursued Lytle. "I come from Mr. Richard Sheldon."

"My relative—my father's cousin?" interrupted Patrice animatedly. "I know you now, sir. You are Colonel Lytle. Mrs. Loring has spoken of you so often. And Mr. Sheldon—why does he never come—never send me word? It is so lonely to feel that one has no warm friends, no thoughtful relatives through all these years, while others have so many."

"Ah! you have forgotten!"

"We won't cage this bird always," muttered Lytle, under his breath, and with a keen glance at the girl's sensitive face. "She is beginning to pine for congenial companionship. She is beginning to deplore her solitary lot. Zounds! if I was a younger man! No, Patrice," he spoke aloud abruptly. "I do not wish to see Mrs. Loring yet; my business this time is with you personally."

Patrice fluttered expectantly, curiously. She had made a motion as if to lead the way to the cottage. At a courtly wave of her visitor's hand she sank to a rustic bench.

"Some serious business complications regarding the affairs of your dead father have recently arisen," he announced prefatorily.

"Is it anything like this, or this, or this?"

"Yes, Colonel Lytle."

"Of course," lied the sleek knave, "they promise no benefit in a money way to himself or his heirs; they refer to interests where others who trusted him are concerned, and where Mr. Sheldon feels right should be done, if possible."

"I do not understand," murmured Patrice vaguely.

"It is scarcely necessary for you to do so. We simply wish to clear up a cloud upon some mine property in which your dead father held a slight interest years ago. It is one of those old Mexican claims—almost valueless, and tangled up in numberless legal complications. The original deed was a scrawl—a lot of unintelligible hieroglyphics. Your father seemed to understand them, and we thought——"

He paused at an animated and intelligent gesture from Patrice.

"I know what you mean!" she cried—"the old Aztec alphabet! Is it anything like this, or this, or this?"

She leant to the smooth sandy path in front of the bench as she spoke, and traced three curious characters in turn.

Colonel Lytle looked excited. The symbols were in a line with those contained in the parchment scroll.

"Why, exactly!" he announced with enthusiasm. "Wait. This shows it better."

He ventured to bring to light a copy of the parchment scroll with which Sheldon had provided him.

Holding a single line into view, he advanced it for the girl's inspection.

"How is that?" he queried.

"I recognise the characters. Yes, they are part of the alphabet."

"Then you can read this?"

"No, Colonel Lytle."

"No!"

Her visitor's voice was full of disappointment.

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"No; you see, sir, I never did understand them entirely. I was quite young. Do not be disappointed till I explain, please."

Patrice had read the overwhelming disappointment that came like a flash into Lytle's face, and hastened to dispel it, her ingenious nature being for ever on the alert to allay trouble.

"When my poor father was in Mexico," she proceeded, "he used to write me long letters. I was only twelve years old then. He would send me curios, write me interesting descriptions of what he saw there, and one day he sent me a copy of what he called a jargon Aztec cipher. It had signs corresponding to every letter in the alphabet. More to amuse than instruct me, very often he wrote me a brief note in this strange sign-language, and I would study it out by aid of the key alphabet he had already sent me."

She sped away.

"I understand," nodded the Colonel, gnawing his moustache nervously, divided between hope and impatience.

"That was so many years ago that I do not believe I could translate a single letter now, but the key—"

"Ah, the key?" murmured the Colonel eagerly.

"That I always preserved."

Lytle's eyes shone.

"I put it in the little compartment at the back of my mother's pocket Bible, and——"

She started to her feet, with a little cry of dismay.

"You have it still?" queried the Colonel quickly and anxiously.

"No, but—how careless of me. Only last evening I took a walk to the cliff near the river. I was reading the Bible for some time. When the storm came up I hastened home, and in my hurry I must have forgotten it."

"Then it must be there now."

"Certainly it must, for it is a spot few frequent, and then too——"

"Let us hasten and see," suggested the Colonel.

"I will go alone," dissented Patrice. "I know a short cut, and am familiar with the windings of the paths. I will not be gone ten minutes."

She sped away, light of foot as a fawn.

Light of heart as a zephyr, too, little dreaming that the mission of the moment was destined to change the entire current of all her fair young life, and place her, ere another hour had passed, face to face with her fate!

(To be continued.)

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Extraordinarily Heavy, very Best Quality, Newest and Choicest Designs. In Old Gold, Sultan, Terra Cotta, Crimson, Sky, Navy, and the latest colours. With handsome border to correspond. Guaranteed to wear for years and give every satisfaction. The sizes and prices as follows (all ready for putting down):

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4½ft. by 7ft.,	11/-	VELVET PILE, BRUSSELS CARPET SQUARES.	9ft. by 12ft.,	38/-
6ft. by 9ft.,	18/-		11ft. by 12ft.,	47/-
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9ft. by 9ft.,	28/-		12ft. by 16ft.,	69/-
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Size.	Reduced Sale Price. Each.
6ft. by 9ft.	5/6
7½ft. by 9ft.	7/6
9ft. by 9ft.	8/6
9ft. by 10½ft.	9/6
9ft. by 12ft.	11/6
10½ft. by 12ft.	13/6
12ft. by 12ft.	15/6
12ft. by 13½ft.	17/6
12ft. by 15ft.	19/6
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